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Triad

The Triad

MARY LEADER

M&G

Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, Inc.

New York

To the memory of my parents, Mabel and Arthur Bartelt, and my friend "Ellie" Kim. And with loving gratitude to my husband, Eric Leader

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Printed in the United States of America

Three People who Broke their Hearts from Bewilderment:

Branwen daughter of Llŷr,
and Caradog son of Brân,
and Ffaraon Dandde

—An Old Welsh Triad

1

It didn't start all of a sudden. As I think back now, there were so many little unexplained incidents that I shoved aside and forgot about until later. There began to be those gaps in my life, little ones at first, but then longer and longer as time went on. I would wonder if my memory was failing me and I worried about the headaches to which I'd become prone, but my doctor told me that it was probably shock from the baby's death.

That had been so unexpected. I put him to bed one night, all rosy and dimpled with health. He looked at me with those big, bright eyes, as he lay fingering the handle of his rattle, then drowsiness drew down his lids and he flipped over on his stomach as he always did and went to sleep with his fist curled around the rattle. The next morning I awakened to the sound of children on their way to school and the disposal truck grinding garbage under our apartment window. Alan was away on one of his projects, so I must have slept right through breakfast. I started to stretch lazily in those moments of waking when one lies between forgetting and remembering, and then sat up with a jerk. Timmy had missed his four o'clock feeding! Had he called and I hadn't heard him? That wasn't possible. I always woke at the

slightest sound he made. I hurried to the crib and there he was, just as I had left him, but his little body was cold.

"Unexplained crib death" was what the doctor wrote on the death certificate after the autopsy, which meant that Timmy went to sleep a normal child and just stopped breathing for no apparent reason. The doctor told me that this is not uncommon—that there's a mysterious and unidentified killer of infants that has been baffling physicians for centuries. Even with today's science, this stalker by night has eluded all attempts to apprehend him.

Alan took the first plane home and there was a quiet funeral—neither of us has any close relatives—and then we moved from the apartment I could no longer bear to live in and bought a deteriorated mansion on the outer edge of a small town and rural community that are gradually being swallowed by the city from which we came.

We plunged feverishly into renovating the shabby, but still imposing centenarian built by an old Great Lakes captain on a bluff high over western Lake Michigan. Through enterprise and shrewd investments, he had increased his holdings from one sailing ship to a whole fleet, and as his fortune grew, so did the riggings on the original house in a procession of extra rooms, balconies, turrets, and a widow's walk, the last a convenient lookout where he could stand with his spyglass and watch his assets heaving to on the horizon. The property had once covered nearly a square mile, but his son's philanderings and gambling debts had whittled it down to about five acres.

Some of the townspeople hinted that the house was haunted—let an old place like that stand empty for a few years, with shutters flapping, curtains rotting at the staring windows, and the old garden creeping toward it, and someone is bound to start imagining things. But to us it was more pathetic than spooky, as though it were crying out for someone to bring it to life again. At the time I had no awareness of *her* whatsoever—but then that was a different matter.

I liked the arrangement of the house—the high-ceilinged drawing room with its bay window overlooking the lake and heavy sliding doors that opened onto a smaller parlor (which I immediately preempted for a library and study), the gracious dining room, the gargantuan kitchen, butler's pantry, and old summer kitchen, now a sunporch—all ranged around a vast center hall and stairs leading to the upper floors. The pattern was not symmetrical and static, as in so many houses, but was full of surprises and unexpected dimensions, reflecting, perhaps, the captain's love of adventure and innovation.

The very spontaneity of the architecture was a challenge. I love to design and create, and this was a decorator's dream, even if it was an architect's nightmare. But while restoring and remodeling an old structure may stimulate the imagination, keeping it in order does nothing but engender boredom. When I was a child I used to love to make my own dollhouses and their furnishings out of cardboard and scraps, but once they were finished I no longer wanted to play with them and keep them dusted and in order. I felt the same about my grown-up dollhouse. Housekeeping is the easiest thing I know of to put off, and old houses are the worst to keep—so many moldings and gingerbread trimmings, to say nothing of antiquated plumbing and sagging walls.

But there was a quality about this place—an air of wistfulness for the love and joy it had once known and yearned for again. The captain's wife had been lively and fun-loving, so it was said, and the house a center of social activity until, one by one, the family died, except the granddaughter of the builder, who lived on alone there until she was over ninety. She never ceased, in her own mind at least, to be the belle she was before her lover eloped with one of the maids. Several times a year she used to send out engraved, gilt-edged invitations to a gala ball at Baldwin House to people no longer alive. The post office employees, to whom Lucinda Baldwin had been as much a town institution as the Civil War monument in the square, would patiently stamp them ADDRESS UNKNOWN and return them to her. In a few months the

same unopened cards would come back for another stamp until at last they became illegible.

The mail carrier, as a boy, had mowed her lawn and kept her old Detroit Electric shined like patent leather. He remembered that while her tongue was tart, her cookies had been sweet, so finally, knowing that she was scraping by on the pittance left to her, he would deliberately neglect to take the invitations to the post office. Instead, he'd stow them away in his mail truck for a week or so, and then return them uncanceled, saving her postage. She never questioned him about this but would greet him with sly gratitude, as if she were on to his little plot to cheat the government, which was no more than due a lady of her quality.

And then one day he found her sprawled by the mailbox, in death a discarded, tattered doll, but still elegant, like the invitations lying scattered about her.

There was a ballroom on the third floor, painted a once-bright red, with faded scarlet satin draped like a sheik's tent from the ceiling. Even in her solitude, Miss Lucinda must have been a swinger. Neighbors reported that lights often burned up there until daylight and sometimes they could hear the faint sound of music from a quavery old gramophone.

The red paint still clung to the ballroom walls, cracked and peeled like the plaster beneath it; the satin hung down in ribbons, and the once-polished parquet floor was dull and stained. But it still lay true and unwarped and I kept thinking what a marvelous playroom this would be—because, of course, we were going to have more children. Already I was taking my temperature every morning and hoping that Alan wouldn't be out of town when the mercury said "go!" Wouldn't they have fun in this old house with its surplus of rooms, surprise nooks and alcoves, widow's walk and cupola? The curved banister between the first and second floors, just made for sliding! And, best of all, the old-fashioned speaking tubes that led from the front and back doors, winding like snakes between the walls and poking their mouths into every room! Oh yes, the speaking tubes—how

could I possibly forget them? At night when I lay in bed I could hear the wind sighing in them as if the house wanted to tell me its tales. I suppose it's strange, considering what people said about the place, but I had absolutely no sensation of menace, not even when Alan's job kept him away from home for days, and sometimes weeks, at a time. Perhaps Lance, the golden retriever collie pup we acquired when we moved, helped to give me a sense of security. The woolly Teddy bear with oversized feet, who, almost from the first, chose to sleep on the floor by my side of the bed, soon developed into an amber Cerberus—insurance against any earthly intruder. And as for ghosts, well, I just didn't believe in them.

Time went by and the house began to shape itself to fit us rather than the past, but then, we were beginning to be a part of its past, too, as months stretched into a year, and then another and another. . . .

And still there was no reason to redo the ballroom, which from a financial standpoint was fortunate for the family exchequer, since remodeling and normal maintenance of the elegant old monster drained our resources more rapidly than we had anticipated. We did rip away the shredded satin in the ballroom and then just closed it up, along with some other rooms we didn't need, and mentally filed them under "later."

Too much time spent on the house consumed the hours I needed for my free-lance writing. Before marrying, I'd been a reporter on a daily in the city, so now I wrote book reviews and special features for them. In addition, I was working on a collection of Greek myths retold in short story form in the light of recent archaeological discoveries. I'd submitted some samples to a publisher and had received a contract to write a dozen tales for a book for teen-agers. These activities gave me an excuse to turn my back on things that should be done in the house and retreat into my world of books. Mrs. Lemke, a widow who lived on a farm nearby, came every Thursday and could always bail me out. And, luckily for me, Alan was proud to have a wife who

was something more than a housekeeper, and he encouraged me to continue my career.

I think–I know–that deep down inside I have always resented it being a woman's task to take care of the house. But this was the wrong neighborhood for such a heretic. I was surrounded on all sides by meticulous *Hausfraus* who made a mystique of keeping house, like Millie Kern next door, who even tied up all her linens in blue satin ribbons. Of course, *she* had her old mother there to help her, but even the others seemed always to be ready to entertain by nine o'clock in the morning–and entertain they did with daily *Kaffeeklatsches* at each other's houses, which often amounted to furtive inspection of housewifely skills. I had neither the efficiency nor the time for such affairs and was in morbid fear of these orderly harpies arriving before the beds were made or snooping through my closets, so I avoided the morning coffees and undoubtedly earned the reputation of snob and slob combined.

So, after the main jobs of repainting, papering, rewiring, and other projects that Alan and I scheduled for the first phase of remodeling, he and I drifted into the separate routines that began imperceptibly to pull us further and further apart. He was either at the office or away on a business trip and I found absorption in my studies the most effective opiate to dull the loneliness and my memories of a tiny life that had once been mine to cherish. The idea of having another child had become an obsession with me, so much so that Alan began to feel that I had pushed him, as a husband, into the background, and regarded him only as a means of renewing my motherhood.

Reality for me lay in the future and I was scornful of the unfulfilled present, which I made into a world of dreams, peopled by the gods and heroes of my stories. Besides, who can define the present? If it exists, then the thin edge of it is more infinitesimal than the sharpest razor, and when it seems to stop or linger it is because the same experience is being repeated over and over. We know the present only by memory, because by the time we reach it it is already past.

My husband is a civil engineer and must travel a great deal. Perhaps it was his being away so much which heightened my sense of remoteness from the present. When he was gone it was sometimes hard to believe in the reality of him. At times I almost forgot how he looked and I'd pull out our photo album just to refresh my recollection of those wonderful lines of his massive head and his sturdy, strong body. That is, I did at first. Later on I didn't even bother, and that made me feel guilty, too. At night as I drifted off to sleep, or if I awakened to my loneliness, I would reach my hand over to his side of the bed, hoping to touch the memory of him lying there. But all I felt was the cool sterility of empty sheets and it was as if he had never been. Oh, I missed him badly: his manhood, his company, his infectious laugh, his love of good music, the spark of his ready temper, the gentleness of his huge hands, the skill and ingenuity with which he could make things about the house run, and his strong arms to carry my packages. But there were times when he was more of a phantom than the people who lived on the printed pages before me.

And yet, perversely, when he was home, the need of him became commonplace and when we went to bed, my feeling for him was superseded by "Will it happen this time?" So I tensed and of course it never did.

One day, while walking back to the house from the mailbox, sorting as I went so that I could give Lance his allotment of junk mail to carry, I was surprised to see a card from the local library with the number of an overdue book listed on it and a note from the book editor at the paper. Wes always called me, so I wondered why he was writing now, and as for the book, I couldn't remember any that I hadn't returned to the library. The letter read:

DEAR BRANWEN:

I am returning your latest review. I admit I am puzzled. I didn't assign this book to you nor did we send you a review copy.

It is not our policy to print critiques on books so long after publication. Furthermore, works as specialized as this, if reviewed at all, are generally turned over to someone with more expertise (professional, I mean) on the subject than you. Will be sending you something in a few days which will be more suited to your critical ability.

Sincerely,
Wes

I thumbed through the typewritten sheets in humiliation and disbelief. This jumbled and incoherent mess purported to be a review of *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex and Were Afraid to Ask* by Dr. David Reuben, but it wasn't mine —I hadn't even read the book. Whoever had written it not only had a poor idea of a prank, but knew nothing about composition or criticism and was a careless speller, another blow to my pride.

My hands trembled from a surge of anger, part of which was unreasonably directed at Wes for not recognizing instantly that this had to be a hoax. If he didn't know my work any better than that. . . .

A telephone call put things straight with Wes, who admitted that it hadn't looked like my work and agreed that it must have been written by someone with a warped sense of humor. As I started to put down the phone, I remembered the overdue library card and dialed again. Joyce Engel, the head librarian, answered.

"I don't know of any overdue book," I told her. "What is the title of 612.6, please?"

"Just a minute, Branwen."

The file cards rasped in the distance as she thumbed through the catalog and then her footsteps crescendoed back to the phone.

"That's Dr. David Reuben's book," she said, "*Everything You Always Wanted. . . .*"

The clock on the kitchen wall seemed to spin out of all context of time as I groped for a chair and sat down. Then the incongruity of it all struck me and I couldn't help laughing.

"There must be some mistake! I didn't check that book out!"

"It was checked out on your card," she replied firmly. "Does anyone else have access to it?"

"Only my husband," I said before I thought. Now why did I say that? Alan? Not likely. He wouldn't do a thing like that. I realized that she was waiting at the other end of the line.

"I–I mean, he has a duplicate," I stammered. "Maybe he lost it. I'll have to ask him. Who was the librarian in charge at the time?"

"Let's see–that was on a Thursday, my day off. It must have been Mrs. Dahlmann."

"Marian?" I was relieved. "She's known me for several years. I'm sure she can clear the matter up."

"Unfortunately, she's on vacation and won't be back for three weeks, but I'll ask her when she returns."

Later that evening, I asked Alan if by any chance he had lost his library card.

"I don't think so," he replied uncertainly, sorting through a heap of credit cards in his wallet. "No, here it is."

"Have you checked out any books lately?"

"Not that I remember," he said. "Why?"

"Oh, nothing." I responded rather absently because by now the distress over the incident had dulled and I had other things on my mind. Gently I stroked his dark bronze hair.

"It's getting late, darling," I said.

"Oho, so the temperature was up this morning!" he said with that knowing look that can be so exasperating.

I pulled my hand back resentfully. He was right, but he didn't have to act as if it were wrong or–or childish for me to want to have another baby. Or perhaps he wasn't as interested in that as I was–maybe–

"I'm sorry," I said stiffly. "I thought you wanted another child,

too. But if you don't—and if my wanting one insults your masculine ego, well, perhaps we'd better forget about it tonight. Some other time perhaps."

I headed for the stairs. I suppose I was hoping he would bound after me, Rhett Butler style, but he didn't. Looking back, I saw he hadn't moved but was just standing there, a strange, taut look on his face. I hated him at that moment and I wanted to hurt him.

"Have you forgotten Timmy so soon?" I flared. "Or is it that you want me all to yourself?"

He went white. "You know better than that, Branwen," he protested.

"Do I?"

"Branwen, for God's sake, stop twisting everything. You know I want another child just as much as you do, but I wish you wouldn't be so darned clinical about it—as if I were some sort of prize stud."

"Oh, I see," I retorted, "the clinical details bore you, do they? Well, I'll have to admit they're not the most romantic rituals in the world, but I happen to be willing. . . ." Sobs choked me, so I turned and ran up the stairs. He caught me just as I got to the bedroom door.

"Will you listen to reason, Branwen?" he demanded, grabbing my arm.

I shook him off. "Oh, *your* reasons are obvious enough," I hissed. "I had hoped we could have another baby, but since everything I say is twisted, I don't suppose I could convince you that that was not my *only* reason. Or is it that I don't satisfy you anymore? I swore to myself when I married you that I'd be your mistress as well as your wife, but it seems I've failed." The serpent within me that was prompting me to anger insinuated another thought into my mind.

"You! You're the one who checked out the book!" I blurted out. "Were you going to hand it to me one day with the relevant

passages underlined? How could you?" Hot tears seared my cheeks.

"What book? What the devil are you talking about?"

The astonishment on his face was genuine, but at that moment I was irrational. Grabbing my night things out of the closet, I ran into the guest room, locked the door, and threw myself down on the bed, making a smear of lipstick and eyeliner on the pillow as I buried my face in it. I heard him pounding on the door, but then he stopped and his steps slowly receded. I sat up and looked at the witch in the dressing table mirror, her hair sticking out in blond wisps and makeup streaking her puffy face. In the distance I could hear Alan washing noisily in the bathroom, then go into our bedroom and slam the door. The eyes in the mirror stared back at me with pupils narrowed and lengthened into ellipsoid slits. Somewhere in the house there seemed to be a whisper of laughter and then all was silent.

Why, of course, I was all wrong—why hadn't I thought of it before? Even if he had checked out that book, Alan wouldn't have written that review. That wouldn't have served his purpose, and he, who had always encouraged me to keep up my writing, would certainly never want to embarrass me down at the paper.

I washed the vestiges of tantrum off my face and went into our bedroom.

"Please, darling," I said, kneeling by his side, "I'm sorry—I didn't mean those things. I've been so upset today. I didn't tell you but someone has played a horrible trick on me and I don't know how or why. For a minute there—when you began talking about being clinical—I thought—oh well, it doesn't matter. I'll explain later—"

The taut lines in his face relaxed, and he reached for me and pulled me into bed with him.

2

As I LOOK back, the book incident was not the first time I had detected something amiss. There had been other occurrences so insignificant they passed by without notice. For instance, things wouldn't be where I left them. I didn't pay any attention at first because I'm careless about leaving papers and books and other items strewn around, often not remembering where I dropped them. When something is lost, usually the last place I look is where it belongs, because I know that's where it won't be. But now things mysteriously began to appear in their proper places more often than was normal and I had no memory of replacing them. Shelves and closets just seemed to rearrange themselves. Actually I was rather pleased with myself. I was becoming a housekeeper at last—and so painlessly!

But no copy of Dr. Reuben's book showed up, nor had I expected it to, and that bolstered my conviction that somehow someone—maybe a resentful neighbor whose *Kaffeeklatsch* I'd scorned—had taken a small revenge. Surely when Marian Dahlmann returned she'd be able to provide an explanation. When another overdue notice arrived and I went back to try to clear up the matter, I found Marian at the desk.

"Yes, Mrs. Engel asked me about it," she told me in a pointedly businesslike manner. Then she lowered her voice, directing her remarks away from other people waiting at the desk.

"Really, Mrs. Ericsson, you and I both know that you did check that book out, now don't we?" Hers was the tone of a teacher who has just caught a student stealing out of someone else's locker. "Mrs. Ericsson" she called me, although we'd long been on a first name basis.

"I don't know any such thing, Marian," I protested. "I didn't check out that book!"

"Now, Mrs. Ericsson"—she was losing patience—"I know you very well and I don't think you have a twin."

I could feel the muscles tightening in the back of my neck.

"There has to be a mistake," I floundered.

Her brown eyes never wavered. "As a matter of fact, Mrs. Ericsson"—she repeated my name with exasperating deliberation—"you were wearing the same dress that day you have on now."

For some reason this woman doesn't like me, I told myself. She has access to the library cards. She could have used my number—and—and written that review! But why? Why? It was all so senseless and not like Marian Dahlmann at all. Still, how else could this be explained? Maybe she envied my mini career. Life as a small-town librarian had few diversions.

"I don't know what you're trying to do, Marian," I said. "I only know that I never checked out that book! I don't have it and you can just stop sending out notices."

Painfully aware of the astonished stares following me, I hurried out of the library and into the car, where Lance leaped joyfully upon me, as if I'd been gone for a year. But I pushed him away sharply, started the car, and drove home dangerously, knocking him off his seat several times as I swung around corners —all the way conjuring up spiteful images of Marian Dahlmann.

The car stopped with a lurch, inches short of the back wall of the old carriage house which was our garage, and my pique

ended there. Lance had flown forward and struck his head against the dashboard, then flopped down on the floor. Only momentarily stunned, he retrieved his dignity and crawled back on the seat beside me, whimpering softly. As I soothed him my sense of proportion returned. Marian Dahlmann was none of the things I'd been imagining her to be—I knew her better than that. In fact, she'd always been extremely gracious and helpful. Besides, her position as librarian was undoubtedly more lucrative than my reviewing career to date.

Perhaps it was a memory slip on her part or confused incidents in the past. I must have been wearing this dress when I checked out some other book. Yes, that must be it! But how was I going to convince her, she was so very positive? My head had begun to throb, so instead of going into the house immediately, I walked with Lance out onto the east lawn.

It was a day to cure headaches. Willows gyrated their feathered veils in the crisp lake breeze—no wonder Helice is their goddess—lime-gold against the black-green of the tall spruces interspersed sedately between them. As I passed, a robin darted from the lower branches of one of the spruces to the high arch of a willow spray and began to scold me. Four turquoise eggs lay in a woven bowl. I hurried on so she could return to the nest, intersecting a dark shadow that fluttered across the lawn. I looked up in time to see a crow light on the top of the spruce where the nest was hidden. It flapped its wings, announced itself, then quieted down and sat there brooding. A little beyond, a flock of unwelcome visitors, grackles in their funereal finery, had settled about a bird feeder, and I shuddered for the four new lives as yet unhatched. Once again aware of the pain in my head, I trudged into the house.

Maybe I fixed supper for myself—Alan was gone again—or maybe I just went to bed to nurse my headache. All I can recall is that when I opened my eyes it was morning and the sunlight was making prisms out of the old-fashioned beveled glass panes. Lance jumped onto the bed and started to wash my face.

Sputtering, I gently repulsed him and was surprised at how curiously stiff and rebellious my muscles were. A knock at the back door brought me hurrying down into the kitchen, still trying to stuff my shirttail into my slacks.

"Why, Mrs. Lemke!" I exclaimed to the round-cheeked woman in blue and white print cotton dress and red sweater. "I hadn't expected you until tomorrow. This is only Wednesday."

She laughed as though I were joking.

"Not by my calendar, Mrs. Ericsson," she said gaily, setting her things down on a kitchen chair. "I went to prayer meeting last night and that's always on Wednesday night, aina?"

I nodded in mute agreement. The Lutheran calendar was not to be denied, but what had happened to mine?

By this time Mrs. Lemke, who never wasted a moment, had headed for the living room to start the dusting, while, with shaking hands, I measured coffee for us into the percolator. Where had Wednesday gone? Above me on the wall I could hear the whirr of the kitchen clock. Through the window I saw Lance disappearing into the woods north of our house—after a rabbit, no doubt. What about him? Had he been trapped in the house all the time I was sleeping? It was inconceivable, but I must have slept the clock around twice—no, three times! From Tuesday night until Thursday morning! Lance was a perfectly house-trained dog, but after all, there's a limit to everything. I thought I had better check the basement before Mrs. Lemke went down there.

Just then she stuck her head through the swinging door.

"Looks like you did a pretty good job yourself yesterday," she remarked. "How did you manage to move that furniture all alone, or is Mister here? What do you want me to do today, besides the wash?"

The front room was alien in its immaculateness. All the junk mail that had been piling up on the stereo had been removed. The furniture gleamed from the patina of new polish, the carpeting was brightened as though shampooed, but strangest of all,

nothing was in its usual place. The piano and davenport had been interchanged, chairs and the coffee table rearranged, and Alan's contour chair moved from its spot by the fireplace to the opposite side of the room. That would never do! Only the stereo and the heavy bookcases remained in their original positions. I could feel Mrs. Lemke's eyes searching mine.

"Oh—I—I felt ambitious yesterday," I lied, massaging a kink in my leg. "I wanted to try out a new arrangement, but it's not going to work out. We'll have to move Mr. Ericsson's chair back to its old place, that's for sure. He'd have a fit. I don't know what I was thinking of. You can start moving things back to their original positions. I'll be back in a minute to help you."

The cellar steps were curved from the wear of generations, making descent into the basement a hazardous maneuver. If Lance had done anything down there I wanted to clean it up before she saw it. In the harsh, intrusive light of a naked bulb, the old washtubs stood gray and passionless against the shining white of the modern washer and dryer, gross anachronisms in this pocket of the past. Here the massive structure of the old house was laid bare, its two-foot-thick walls of stone masonry and the heavy beams, still with hand-wrought nails in them. Attached to the furnace chimney was the ancient wood stove I often used as an incinerator. Once when the electricity failed during a storm I prepared breakfast on it. The past was not without its conveniences. The house also boasted a pair of cisterns. One stood like a sarcophagus at the far end of the basement, its sand-colored concrete sides glazed with dampness and age. It had probably been added, as the house had grown, to catch rain off the many-faceted roof after the other one, which was below floor level, had proved inadequate to hold both the ground water and the run-off from the roof. The older cistern lay like a subterranean lake beneath a large patch of wooden flooring, its water inky in the cellar gloom. The only entrance to it was by a trapdoor, which had been in bad repair when we bought the house. I made Alan fix it so that it would fit firmly over the hole, as I was afraid

Lance, or an unwary repairman, might fall through. Alan also repaired the system of alternating pumps, which, we discovered, had been cleverly fitted with a valve so that water could be drawn and filtered from either cistern for washing clothes.

I checked the laundry chute. Empty! Even the wash had been done! It was fortunate I hadn't told Mrs. Lemke to strip the linen from the beds. How could I have accomplished all that and not remember? *If* I did it! But somebody had and that somebody had to be me, I decided. I struggled vainly to remember, but my mind produced only a blank. And I could detect no sign of desperation on Lance's part, so someone had to have let him out. Strange sort of amnesia! And not altogether undesirable if only it weren't so uncanny. I wondered if the shoemaker and his wife hadn't had mixed feelings when they discovered their work had been done for them overnight.

Mrs. Lemke's heavy steps thudded overhead. She'd be waiting to hear from me. I'd better think of something else for her to do—quick!

"Mrs. Lemke?" I called up the cellar speaking tube.

"Ja, Mrs. Ericsson?" her voice echoed back.

"We won't be washing today. I—I did it yesterday. I—wanted to get things out of the way because I had another project in mind. Would you be willing to help me paint the kitchen?"

"Oh, sure!"

"I'll be up in a minute. If the coffee's ready, go pour yourself a cup. There's some coffee cake in the breadbox," I added.

"Ja, Mrs. Ericsson," I heard her say, and then, "Yes, Branwen," in a whispery voice quite unlike hers. I must have misheard her, I thought.

Grabbing a bottle of paint-and-varnish remover and some sandpaper from Alan's workbench, I hurried back upstairs to continue instructions. Mrs. Lemke was holding a plate that was empty of everything but crumbs.

"The coffee cake is all," she said, reproach implicit in her tone.

"Oh—" I hesitated. "Oh, yes, I ate it yesterday—I forgot. Well, we can toast some frozen waffles."

"No, thanks, I had waffles by my house this morning already," she informed me, "but you better eat something."

"No, I'll just have coffee," I replied. "I want to get to the hardware store to pick up some paint. While I'm gone you might make up the bed. The sheets are fresh so you won't have to change them. Then you can finish in the living room and if I'm not back before you're done there, you can start sanding in the kitchen."

Painting the kitchen was an inspiration. It answered Mrs. Lemke's questions, and certainly the kitchen needed it. Alan and I had covered the stained and chipped yellow walls with wallpaper that had an indefinite pattern of silvery green willow wands over a pink sunset background, but we hadn't gotten around to the cabinets and moldings which previous owners had layered with a dark varnish that clung in glutinous beads. Mrs. Lemke's abundant supply of elbow grease would come in handy for sanding the aged varnish.

The job went faster than I expected. The more I moved around the more my muscles loosened. Mrs. Lemke and I worked together so well that we even had time to do the long, narrow butler's pantry before she had to leave to prepare dinner for her son. There were still the little finishing touches to be applied, however, so I munched on whatever I could scrounge out of the refrigerator and kept going until nearly midnight.

By now my head was raging again—no wonder with that paint smell. But what an improvement in the kitchen! I cleaned the brushes, removed the masking tape, folded up the paint cloths and put them out in the shed with the empty cans of paint. Then I stumbled upstairs and to bed.

The next thing I remember is opening my eyes to see Alan's trousers draped over a chair. So he'd come home early! Yes, there was his suitcase standing open near the closet, still packed. I turned over, feeling the full impact of stiff muscles on stiff muscles in every joint. Outside, Lance was barking joyfully and Alan

shouting to him in that game of tag they always played. Wondering what time he'd gotten in, I turned and saw the dent in the pillow. He must have come in sometime during the night and hadn't awakened me. Dear Alan! He was always so considerate. I'd better get down and fix breakfast—or brunch—right away!

Sausages were browning and I had just ladled the first pancake onto the hot griddle when he came in, Lance following him proudly with the morning paper between his teeth. Alan was humming softly under his breath and looking at me with new interest in his eyes. I turned my head to give him a greeting kiss and found myself locked in an embrace. The aroma of burning pancake assailed my nostrils. Extricating myself, I lifted the charred specimen off the griddle and dumped it in the garbage.

"Sorry I slept late, darling," I said, spooning out another pancake. "I hadn't expected you until tonight. Thanks for not waking me—I was tired."

But he wasn't listening. His arms encircled me and he ran his lips softly over the back of my neck.

"Hey, you'll make me burn this one, too," I protested, pushing him away.

He remained silent, but I could feel his eyes on me.

"Were you surprised about the kitchen?" I asked finally, as I flipped the pancake over. "How do you like that shade of hot pink? Don't you think it's a good match?"

"A hot wife makes a better one," he murmured, coming at me again.

"Oh, Alan, really!" I shoved him away.

"Ho, ho!" he exclaimed, turning me toward him and putting his finger under my chin to lift my face to his, "So we have Branwen again! And just last night you said you'd thrown her out of the window and from now on were dedicating yourself to loving Alan Ericsson because he is what he is and not just because he might be the father of your future children."

I tensed. "Oh, I did now, did I?" I parried. "And if I'm no longer Branwen, just what *is* my name, may I ask?"

"A very odd one. Another Welsh one, you said–like Branwen–and a lot harder to spell, but I like it. Say, what's the matter, don't you remember telling me?"

I placed the pancake on his plate, trying not to let my hand shake as I did so, and then started to ladle more batter onto the griddle.

"Of course, I do!" I retorted, "but I'll bet *you've* forgotten it. Welsh names aren't easy."

"I'll never forget this one–Rhiannon!"

Rhiannon! I stood there with the bowl suspended and batter running unheeded over the rim of the griddle onto the stove.

"Hey, watch what you're doing!" he exclaimed, grabbing the bowl out of my hand.

Actually I was grateful for the diversion that afforded me the chance to avert my eyes and hide the shock that must have been reflected in them. He helped me clean up the mess and somehow we got through that miserable breakfast. We chatted and admired the rosy glow of the kitchen and I did my best to find out, in an oblique way, what actually happened the night before. The most I could determine was that Alan had caught an early plane in Denver, and within an hour after I had collapsed on the bed in sheer exhaustion, wearing an old, mended yellow nightgown, Alan had arrived home to find Aphrodite waiting up for him in a sheer black negligee.

He mustn't know I don't remember, I told myself. I must take for my own the thing that isn't mine. How had this come about? And why, if it had happened as he said, was I back in my old gown this morning when I awoke? Had I really suggested that he call me Rhiannon? But if I hadn't, where could he possibly have gotten that name? How could he know that such a name even existed unless he'd read Welsh folklore, which was highly unlikely.

"I've changed my mind about that secret name," I said, trying to sound casual, but my hand was really trembling now as I poured syrup on my pancakes.

"Why? I like it. It does things to you. I'm going to call you that from now on; that is, when we're alone."

"Well, don't!" I spoke more sharply than I meant to. "I don't know why I said that last night. I suppose the name just popped into my head and sounded romantic for the moment. But I really don't like it much. It's from an old Welsh fairy tale my grandmother used to tell me. No one is ever called Rhiannon anymore, at least not in this country."

No one I'd ever heard of, that is, except my cousin and I had never mentioned her to Alan. Why should I? She had died so many years before.

"I'll admit it's a strange name and I wouldn't even attempt to spell it," he said. "It's even odder than Branwen."

"Branwen is odd!" I bristled. "You're lucky I wasn't named Cerridwen, Creiddylad, or Blodeuwedd."

He threw up his hands in mock horror. "You win!" he said. "I'll settle for Branwen—although I did like Rhiannon. There's something silken about that name that suits you. In fact, you look like a Rhiannon."

So had I then, though I was four years younger than she, but it was not surprising. Our parents were two sets of identical twins, so we were as close kin as you can be without being sisters.

After Alan left for his office and I had cleaned up the dishes, I went to my study to read. The new book from Wes had arrived and I was anxious to get at it, but I found I couldn't concentrate. The name Rhiannon seemed to be written at the top of every page. I finally put the book down and went into the backyard, Lance bounding down the path ahead of me. Tulips outlined a carpet of violets and lilies of the valley the length of the walk. As I stopped to flick off the seedpods of several tulips that had dropped their petals, I noticed some upstart thistles that had invaded the violet bed. A stab of pain rewarded my foolhardy attempt to pull them gloveless. Sucking my wounded fingers, I continued past a bed of Virginia bluebells, which were like bits

of lake peeking through the filigree of wild columbine that grew among them. Above, a canopy of white lace mantillas sheathed the talons of a miniature grove of hawthorn. Beyond were the green fronds of raspberry bushes, just beginning to show clusters of hard, pale green buds, which in a couple of months would swell into ruby velvet, while the velvet on the stems would harden and sharpen into thorns. I looked toward the woods in the ravine, where white patches of trillium showed through the trees, and I longed to go in there in search of morels, and maybe, with luck, an early lady's slipper or two, but recent rains had left the ground too soggy. . . .

Raspberries and rain and a little cat buried! But that was all so long ago. I mustn't think about it. Had the robin babies hatched yet? I turned back toward the house by way of the willows and pines, approaching the nest softly so as not to disturb the mother if she were there. But she wasn't and the nest was empty. On the ground I saw the remains of newly hatched birds, shredded by cruel beaks, and in the distance I thought I heard a robin cry.

Back in the house I tried to settle down to my reading again, but I couldn't sit still. Why should the mere mention of that name affect me so? I went upstairs and made the bed, then unpacked Alan's things and put them away, stopping myself just in time from throwing the clean things down the laundry chute with the soiled ones. After that I just paced, barely conscious of what I was doing, wandering aimlessly from room to room, reliving that summer and the day I had wanted to forget.

3

IT HAPPENED WHEN I was nine and Rhiannon a ripening thirteen. Every summer I spent several weeks at my relatives' farm in southwestern Wisconsin, and my cousin Rhiannon would return the visit to us in the city later in the summer. Our parents wanted us to grow up like sisters, but they failed to take into consideration the difference in our ages and temperaments. Our features were strikingly identical and we had the same pale blond hair, but there the resemblance ended. My cousin was about as much to my liking as castor oil. She was a born homemaker, people always said, a model child. Aunt Megan bragged that Rhiannon could make her own bed when she was only four, and it was true that she kept her room in meticulous order and won all the baking and sewing ribbons in the 4-H exhibit at the county fair.

In school Rhiannon was a "genius" in mathematics, my hardest subject, although I suspect she didn't do very well in reading, as Aunt Megan never talked about that. Besides, I never saw my cousin pick up a book voluntarily, outside of a movie magazine, and her spelling was, to say the least, unique.

Domestically inclined as she was, Rhiannon was also an expert

equestrienne. She had learned to ride when she was barely able to toddle, and later Uncle Peter bought her a swift and spirited white mare which she rode bareback. City-bred, I never got over my need for a saddle and I always felt awkward on Pryderi, the Welsh pony that Rhiannon had outgrown. Only by the most insistent urging could this fat and senior citizen be coaxed out of his ragged dogtrot. So there I'd be, flapping the reins and clucking my tongue, while Rhiannon, her long hair streaming in the wind, her body and the mare's fused into one, would be rocketing across the meadows, hurdling hedges and fences, and then circling back to jeer at my clumsiness. Once, as I gazed in horror, she dove her horse off a high bank into a spring-fed quarry. I was sure, as I watched the water close over their heads, that they would both be drowned, but in a moment they emerged, the mare swimming smoothly, and Rhiannon, her hair gleaming like wet pearl, triumphantly astride.

Naturally, I had to try it, too. I turned my Pegasus in the direction of the quarry, digging my heels into his chubby sides and closing my eyes tight. But instead of plunging into the abyss as I had expected, I was catapulted backward onto the hard ground as Pryderi reared in terror. I learned later, while Aunt Megan simultaneously scolded me and treated my bruises, that the pony had always had an abnormal fear of water.

"I warned her," Rhiannon lied blandly as she watched her mother apply the smarting disinfectant to my wounds, "but you know Branwen—she never listens." I knew she was hoping I'd cry out when the medicine stung me, but that was one pleasure I stubbornly denied her.

My mother, who wanted me to be just as accomplished as my cousin, was always holding Rhiannon up to me as a paragon: "Rhiannon never scuffs her shoes." "Rhiannon sews beautifully." "Rhiannon doesn't come in with torn clothes." "Rhiannon never has untidy hair." "Rhiannon's room is always neat and clean—not like your pigsty." "Rhiannon knows how to organize her time. She not only takes prizes at the county fair for her needlework,

she wins ribbons in the horse show." Rhiannon—Rhiannon—Rhiannon! I choked on the name.

My aunt's weekly letter to my mother was a dread inevitability, as it always meant more admonishments. It never occurred to me that my mother did her own share of boasting. She didn't believe in praising her own child to her face, but I didn't know that then, and I grew up thinking that everyone admired Rhiannon because she was efficient, organized, and well-coordinated, while I was heedless, untidy, awkward, and my mother and father's love obviously mere obligation.

But I knew a Rhiannon the others didn't—one who secretly pinched me and pulled my hair. A Rhiannon who always found innumerable sly ways to torment me and rouse me to strike back openly, so that I'd be punished for fighting.

The older we grew the cleverer at it she became. If it was my turn to mop the floor, she would shove dust under the rugs after I'd finished and then call Mother or Aunt Megan and tell them that that was where I put my moppings. Once she tripped me when I was carrying some of my mother's best dishes, but by the time Mother got there, Rhiannon had disappeared and no one would believe I hadn't been careless. Another time she deliberately smashed my best doll, the precious bisque one that had been my mother's when she was little, and when I was caught tearfully picking up the pieces, I got the blame.

I was too young to realize then that some of her resentment may have stemmed from the fact that I upstaged her by arriving four years later than she did. She had been used to all the attention from parents, aunt, uncle, and grandparents alike. Then suddenly I was the family novelty, and when she developed into a gangling gap-toothed preteener, I was still in the cute stage.

Aunt Megan probably felt I had stolen the limelight from her darling, too, and that may account for her defensiveness. Actually, by the time of that terrible summer the tables had begun

to be reversed, for Rhiannon was developing the lithe grace of maidenhood, while I was well into the awkward years.

That last vacation on the farm started out happily. As soon as they brought me back from the bus station, Uncle Peter went out to the barn and returned with a tiny ball of golden fluff, which he deposited in my eager hands. It was the only survivor of their cat's last batch and Uncle Peter said he wanted me to have it. This was the first time I had ever owned anything alive, something that moved and breathed and had a life independent of my imagination. It was all warmth and purring silk as it lay in my hands and gently investigated my cheek.

"You mean, it's mine for when I'm here?" I asked.

"It's yours permanently," Uncle Peter amended. "We asked your parents and they said it would be all right for you to bring it home."

"Oh, Uncle Peter!" I cried, slipping one arm around his neck and giving him a big hug. "Thank you, thank you!"

I kissed him and Aunt Megan and then turned back to the kitten adoringly, but as I did, a sensation of coldness enveloping me caused me to look up. Rhiannon's eyes were glittering green slits. *She* wanted it for herself! Or at least she did after she knew Uncle Peter was giving it to me. I held the kitten out to her.

"I love it!" I said. "But maybe you wanted it, Rhiannon?"

"Oh, no!" she said smoothly. "Our cat can have more. I want you to have it—really I do."

"That's my unselfish girl!" Aunt Megan's gaunt face was suffused with pride. "Just you try to be like her, Branwen."

"Now, Meg," Uncle Peter protested, picking up his farm bureau newspaper from the table and heading for his big chair, "don't you start bragging about your daughter again. You'll have her swell-headed first thing. I like Branwen just as she is. This family has enough twins. A little individuality is a good thing."

Rhiannon's look was venomous.

"Oh, there's enough individuality among us," Aunt Megan

sniffed. "Before we married you couldn't tell Olwen and me apart. You remember—we used to switch dates on you and Pat and you'd never know it."

Uncle Peter chuckled slyly. "That's nothing," he said, "we did the same thing to you."

She leaned across the table, one scrawny arm akimbo. "You think we didn't know it? It's surprising we ever got ourselves unscrambled for the wedding so that the right pairs got hitched. In fact, I sometimes wonder if we really did, but that's something none of us will ever know. You have a college degree like your brother, but did *you* make use of it? No, you stayed on to manage your folks' farm, and when they died we just naturally took over. So now look at us. My sister's a fashion plate. Me? I'm a dowdy old hen with graying hair and a frizzy permanent, while next to your brother, you look like a migrant worker."

It was an old argument, but Uncle Peter didn't get to make his usual reply because they both were distracted by Rhiannon, who had gone red in the face and was bobbing up and down convulsively, arms clutched across her chest.

"Oh, dear!" my aunt fussed. "I hope you're not going to have another one of your asthma attacks, darling."

Rhiannon nodded, her coughing working up into spasms, then into harsh, sibilant wheezes that made her sound like a winded horse. I suppose I should have been just as concerned as my aunt and uncle, but it had long been apparent to me that she always had these attacks when things weren't going her way.

Aunt Megan rushed out of the room to get her her medicine, while Uncle Peter stood by, patting her on the back ineffectually. It was amazing how she could galvanize the attention of her parents with this device. I knew that once she succeeded in making her point her wheezes would subside, and that they did after my uncle took her into his lap and began stroking her hair and forehead, although she managed a few hacks for show when Aunt Megan came back with the pills. After swallowing one, she lay there, her arms around her father's neck, her face still flushed

and sweaty, and her eyes, as changeable as lake water, glinting at me triumphantly.

It was obvious, to me at least, that Rhiannon resented any show of affection toward me by her father. To me, Uncle Peter was special. Maybe Aunt Megan was piqued because my father earned his living at a glass-topped desk, but I thought Uncle Peter had the better of it out here on the farm where he could smell the earth and watch the things he'd planted grow and be fruitful. I used to follow him everywhere—around the barnyard as he did his chores, across the sprouting fields, through the woods. He had a way of blending with the landscape as though he lived within it, not on it. Snowling, the pet albino crow he'd rescued from other crows when it was a fledgling, would ride along on his slightly bent shoulders and converse with him in a language I couldn't understand, but Uncle Peter seemed to know perfectly well.

"What 'mystery' shall we show Branwen today?" Uncle Peter would ask Snowling, who would peck his lip gently and make soft, uncrowlike noises in her throat.

"The tadpoles, did you say?" And off we'd go to a small pond behind the barn to gaze at the wigglers in the water in their various stages of development until they were full-grown frogs.

Or perhaps it would be a cocoon hatching a lovely monarch, a baby robin bursting out of its sky-blue prison, the woven perfection of an oriole's nest, or the excitement of a cow having her calf or a mare dropping her foal.

On cool days, in the variable Wisconsin summer, we'd explore the fields, jade and amber with ripening corn, barley and oats. There were the lithe little gophers popping in and out of their burrows, and harmless green garter snakes that slithered noiselessly away at our approach, although sometimes Uncle Peter would catch one and stroke it gently, until it lay calm and charmed in his hand. Then he would let me pet it until our mutual fear was gone—the snake's and mine—and I could take it

into my own hands and know it was not the repulsive, slimy creature I had imagined it to be.

Then my uncle would make me look at the grains individually, and I learned the beauty of them—the Oriental grace of a spray of oats, like a miniature Tree of Life, the iridescence of the silken tail of a blade of barley, and the bold, coarse symmetry of a stalk of corn, flaunting its tasseled pregnancy.

But when the winds would turn to the southwest, driving the temperature up into the nineties, or even the hundreds, then Uncle Peter would welcome the excuse to take me down to the tree-shaded banks of the serpentine river that scalloped one of the borders of the farm. There we'd skip rocks across the water or venture out in the leaky wooden canoe that would ship water up to the gunwales and still remain afloat, but thoroughly unwieldy until we'd pull her in to shore, roll her over to disgorge the river, then start out again.

Squirrels darted up and down the trunks of trees and were tame to our presence, because Uncle Peter always brought a store of nuts for them. They would even feed from my hand, although I protested vigorously the day one bit my finger.

"Couldn't tell you from the nut," my uncle teased me, feeding a morsel to Snowling.

He couldn't charm all creatures, however, especially the neighbor's bull, which took vigorous exception when we cut through his pasture one day. He held his peace until we were halfway across, then lowered his head, dug his hooves into the turf, and came for us. We made a mad dash for the fence, Snowling circling excitedly above our heads and making futile passes at the bull. As we reached the barbed wire, Uncle Peter picked me up and threw me over, then tried to vault the fence. He made it, but his overalls didn't, and he had to hold the seat of them closed all the way home.

"A lot of tomfool playing around," Aunt Megan muttered but the corners of her mouth curved.

Rhiannon had always scorned our adventures, especially since

she'd had Arbeth. Now she was training the mare for another horse show.

"Come see if the killdeer eggs have hatched," I pleaded with her one day that last summer. "Uncle Peter says he knows where there's a nest of new bunnies, too."

"So what's so interesting about eggs and bunnies?" she asked scornfully, swinging herself up into the saddle. "They happen all the time." She brought her riding crop down across Arbeth's rump and they cantered away, leaving dust in my face.

The bunnies squirmed lazily in their fur-lined nest.

"They'll be more fun after they get their eyes open," my uncle commented. "Let's go see about the killdeers. My guess is that they're about ready to hatch, and if they are, we might miss them."

"Why?"

"Because killdeers are miniature adults when they hatch, and as soon as their natal down dries they start fending for themselves and disappear into the grasses."

The big event had just taken place, for when we arrived, three fluffy gray youngsters lay blinking in the sunlight, and a fourth was just emerging from its dark-gray granite-colored shell. Mother killdeer had hopped off the nest at our approach and was going through her plover ritual of trying to decoy us away, uttering piteous cries, dragging a "broken wing," and spreading her tail to reveal dawn-colored petticoats.

"How do they ever survive in these nests on the ground where anything could get at them?" I said wonderingly.

"Mainly by their own cunning," Uncle Peter answered. "See, here comes papa killdeer to assist. He'll try to draw us in another direction, but if we continue to be a threat he might even attack."

But this time all the efforts of the senior killdeers were in vain, for just then Rhiannon came vaulting Arbeth over the hedge bordering the field. One flying hoof crushed the nest and the quivering babies in it into a bloody horror. Snowling, starting up from my uncle's shoulder in alarm, got caught in the reins and

fell to the ground, her neck broken. To this day I can see the pain in my uncle's eyes as he stared at the mess, and for once I think he would have taken a strap to Rhiannon (how I hoped he would!) if my aunt hadn't intervened.

"The idea! Blaming Rhiannon for what was obviously an accident," Aunt Megan snorted. "Her winning a ribbon in the horse show is a lot more important than a few birds. The parents will just lay more eggs and forget all about these."

Rhiannon smirked in the shelter of her mother's defense, and yet I don't believe she ever returned Aunt Megan's love. She seldom showed her affection and was often impatient with her, treating her mother as if she were sort of a drab. With Uncle Peter it was different. She was always trying to impress him with something she had baked for him or some new way she did her hair. And how she could maneuver him! But for all that, he was his own man and she knew that there was a part of his world she could never penetrate. This only made him all the more attractive to her and her all the more jealous, not only of me, but of any attention he paid her mother. She was constantly downgrading her mother to him. But either Aunt Megan was stupid or she bore her daughter's contempt in silence.

The kitten cost me dear in those next two weeks. Rhiannon saw to that. I named it "Purrcival," having just "discovered" King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table, and I thought myself altogether clever to have concocted such a pun. Rhiannon scoffed at the name, echoing it mockingly every time I used it until she almost spoiled it for me. But then, no matter what I called the kitten, she would have made fun of it.

Uncle Peter took me fishing one day without asking the others to go along, since they both hated the sport. Besides, I think he was tacitly punishing Rhiannon for the killdeers and Snowling. However, it was a tactical mistake. Aunt Megan grumbled about things needing to be done on the farm, while Rhiannon pouted and gave me dirty looks. Nevertheless, my uncle insisted he didn't need to hold hands with the corn to make it grow and one

day out of the summer wouldn't make that much difference, and besides, I should have *some* fun during my visit.

Hot, muggy weather had crept out of the western plains and settled down on us, so it was with infinite relief that we sat in the shade of the butternut and willow trees that followed the convolutions of the river. We were after bullheads, and I was glad Uncle Peter had brought along beefsteak for bait instead of the rotten Limburger cheese he'd experimented with last year. Someone had told him that bullheads love stinky cheese, so he'd gone to a cheese factory on the edge of town and gotten some of their spoiled Limburger, which we wrapped in small pieces of cheesecloth and dangled in the water. Luckily, the local bullheads had not turned out to be cheese epicures, so he'd gone back to beef. In this heat the stench would have been unbearable.

Not that the effectiveness of the bait mattered much. The main idea was not to catch fish but to *be* fishing. Our fun was dampened anyway, now that Snowling was not with us. I dabbled my feet in the water and leaned back against a willow trunk, munching some lemony sheep sorrel. Uncle Peter stuck his pole into the riverbank and promptly snoozed against another tree. Dragonflies hovered above the shimmering surface of the sluggish water, while myriads of tiny creatures went about their humming lives around us.

I viewed the world through slitted lids, reality receding from me. Fairy knights rode the dragonfly horses in a splendid tournament. Their squires were the silly waterbugs that hopped aimlessly about, much to the amusement of the fairy court, which sat under a canopy of fern. A katydid orchestra, still groggy from its concert the night before, halfheartedly tuned its instruments, readying itself to strike up "God save the Queen!" or whatever their national anthem is. The knightly company loomed larger and larger as I felt myself shrinking to be one with them. . . .

My pole was nearly jerked out of my hand. Instinctively I pulled back. A huge bullhead came catapulting out of the water

and landed by my side. It wasn't even hooked, just had a toothhold on the meat. Uncle Peter roused and pounced on the fish, which was flopping around, trying to find its way back to the water. It slipped out of his grasp and I made a lunge. A searing pain wrenched through my left hand. The bullhead had made good use of one of his barbels. Blood spurted wildly and my uncle forgot the fish while he tended to my hand. In the meantime the bullhead slithered off the muddy bank back into the water.

We returned home with no trophies and one lacerated hand, which Aunt Megan doctored grimly, relating her own troubles with Purrcival. It seems that someone—maybe accidentally or maybe not—shut the kitten in the broom closet, and by the time he was let out many hours later, nature had taken its course. Aunt Megan wiped up the puddle with a dish towel, rinsed it out slightly, and hung it over the back of a chair to dry before putting it in the dirty wash. Rhiannon made much of the incident when we got back, but no one told me which towel had been used and I had no way of knowing it had been replaced on the rack—and that's where I took it from, even though Rhiannon insisted it was still on the chair. It was my turn to do the dishes, and just as I was drying the last one Rhiannon came into the kitchen.

"I told you not to use the red-checked towel," she scolded.

But she hadn't, and I was positive the towel had been on the rack, too—I'd bet my life on who slyly replaced it there. But the upshot was that I had to redo the dishes while Rhiannon sat in her room and read movie magazines—or maybe she was polishing her fingernails and fooling around with makeup and hairspray. She had all sorts of intriguing things in jars and tubes that she'd bought on the sly, but she wouldn't let me share in her rituals because she said I was too young.

"What good would makeup do you?" she smirked at me on one occasion, her lips smeared a furious red, her lids blue with eyeshadow.

"Look at you! Your shirttail hanging out of your jeans as usual, and your braids have wisps sticking out all over. Why don't you comb your hair once in a while?"

"I do!" I protested, "but it gets loose anyway."

"Well, I don't suppose you can help being naturally sloppy," she conceded, "any more than you can help having a cowlick or blue eyes, for that matter."

"What's wrong with my eyes?" I flared indignantly.

"Blue eyes are so *ordinary*. There's no point in accentuating them. Now mine are like emeralds."

That wasn't quite true. They were much paler than emeralds, like the new-washed green of a lake at sunset after a rain, and they were fascinating eyes. Rhiannon *was* beautiful and capable and I hated her for both.

The next morning Uncle Peter suggested that we explore Devil's Cave in a high bluff overlooking the farm, which was known locally as Lover's Leap. I think it was his way of apologizing to me for the unjust treatment I'd received the night before. Aunt Megan scolded and said, not without justice, that crawling through a muddy cave was the worst thing for an injured hand. Rhiannon, who'd been invited, too, said she thought caves were creepy places and she had better things to do than to get herself all dirty in some hole in the ground.

We left the breathless heat of the daylight and entered the breathless cold of the cavern. It *was* muddy and we soon came to a long stretch of tunnel where the roof and floor were less than two feet apart and we had to squirm along on our bellies. Waves of claustrophobia assailed me as I struggled forward in that confining space, unable even to raise my head, as though the whole weight of the bluff above were pressing down on me. My hand ached as I used it to propel myself along, but I said nothing and my uncle kept urging me on, saying that our momentary discomfort would be rewarded by what lay beyond.

When at last we were able to stand, I caught my breath in

wonder. We were in a vast chamber, in the center of which was a cluster of pinnacled stalagmites that spiraled upward like a fairy castle. In the light of Uncle Peter's lantern, the moist formations glistened a soft, salmon pink.

"Caer Sidi!" I exclaimed. "The underworld castle that goes round and round."

"You still remember your grandmother's stories about the old country," Uncle Peter remarked, mildly surprised. "Yet you weren't more than seven when she died."

He seemed to have forgotten that that was only two years before.

"But she made me *see* everything as she told it," I replied. "How could I forget? I can almost imagine old King Arawn leaning out over a parapet, keeping watch over his kingdom."

Uncle Peter laughed. "I doubt if old Arawn ever got this side of the ocean, but this cave *is* occupied—come over here!"

He led me into a shadowy recess and flashed his lantern. I clutched his arm in sudden dismay. Lying on the floor were two skeletons, their bones intertwined. A spear cut through them both. Necklaces of fine Indian metalwork hung around the neckbones.

"Don't be afraid," he calmed me. "Do you know who they are?"

I answered in awe. "Then the old legend is true—the one about the Indian lovers from rival tribes who leaped off the bluff rather than be separated!"

"Only they didn't leap. That's as common a story as 'George Washington slept here'! Yet this time there was a thread of truth. The lovers—for one skeleton is female and the other male—must have hidden in here, but someone, possibly a disappointed rival or a medicine man carrying out a ritual execution, murdered them."

"How long have you known this was here, Uncle Peter?"

"A long time. These are old friends by now."

"But why didn't you tell the newspapers?"

"And have these lovers disturbed? I figure they earned their peace—and their place together."

"Didn't you even tell Aunt Megan or Rhiannon?"

"No," he said simply, "I never did."

"But you shared it with me!" I felt terribly proud.

"I thought you'd understand. I won't always own this farm, and before someone else does, I'm going to blast in the entrance so that no one will suspect what's here."

I stared at him. The thought that he and Aunt Megan wouldn't always be here—that there'd be no farm to come to—was incomprehensible to me. Nor could I fathom his reason for keeping the secret, but I could respect the sentiment behind it, so I didn't protest.

"If Rhiannon knew you'd told me about this and not her, she'd be furious," I said at last, not adding that most likely she was already jealous of this morning's excursion even if she *had* been asked.

"Then it will be our secret," he said.

"That'll be fun—having a secret from Rhiannon. But is it fair? She loves you so much."

He was quiet a minute, looking at the skeletons, and then turned away, a strange, sad note in his voice as he spoke: "Rhiannon doesn't love anyone, Branwen—she owns them."

We returned in time for Aunt Megan to send me out to pick raspberries, after she'd made us both change into clean clothes. It was sweltering in the raspberry patch, and I was sorry the wild red plums weren't ripe, as I could have picked them in the shade. By now my hand was really throbbing, but I suspended a pail round my middle with a belt run through its handle and I could use my right hand nearly exclusively. Besides, I wasn't thinking about my hand, as the red fruit dropped into the pail—and into my mouth. I was uneasy because I hadn't been able to find Purrcival anywhere. Usually he rode my shoulder when I was near the house. Maybe he was out somewhere stalking a mouse.

Waves of heat rose from the ground, with no breeze to relieve them. My scanty clothes stuck to my body, and skin to skin, as the sun rode its relentless arc. I moved slowly, inspecting the berries for the black bugs that prefer the riper fruit, and the occasional green worm or hopper that makes no distinction. Gnats and mosquitoes rose to plague me. My bare feet burned on the hard ground. Above, some robins and grackles scolded me for stealing their fruit.

My pail was almost full when I heard Aunt Megan calling from the house. Maybe Purrcival had returned and was getting under foot. I undid the pail from my middle and went toward the kitchen. I was barely in the door when Aunt Megan grabbed me by the shoulders and began to shake me, knocking berries all over the kitchen floor.

"How could you be so cruel, Branwen? We'll never give you another pet."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Aunt Megan," I stammered. "Has something happened to Purrcival? You know I was looking for him."

She glared at me contemptuously. "That was just to throw me off the track. You know what you did to him, you wicked girl!"

Still gripping me, she flung open the oven. As its warm breath engulfed me, I saw Purrcival lying limp and dead, his little paws outstretched helplessly toward the door.

Tears streaming down my cheeks, I picked the tiny body up and held it to me.

"Honest, Aunt Megan," I pleaded, "I didn't do it! I loved him. You've got to believe me!"

My obvious distress almost convinced her, but she was at a loss for an explanation.

"Who could have turned that oven on?" she puzzled, "and how could that cat have gotten in there? *I* didn't do it. Certainly your uncle didn't, and I *know* Rhiannon wouldn't do such a thing! Let's see—" she began to try to reconstruct events—"you were picking raspberries, your uncle was out in the field, I was doing

the wash in the basement, and Rhiannon was upstairs sewing. I wonder if that crazy Hazlitt kid sneaked in here. I caught him in the orchard the other day stealing green apples and sent him packing. Maybe he was trying to get back at me. I always did say he wasn't quite all there."

It was the flimsiest of theories, and it was apparent she wasn't completely satisfied with it. I knew better, too. Over her shoulder I saw Rhiannon standing in the doorway, gloating. Oh, how I wanted to accuse her to her face, but I realized Aunt Megan would never believe me and I'd just make things worse for myself.

"Well, Branwen, I guess you didn't do it," she said without conviction, "but I just couldn't think of any other way. You'd better put him in the trash burner."

"No!" I cried, hugging the tiny body to me. "He's not garbage! I'll bury him."

Long before dawn I was awakened by the curtains and shades flapping wildly and rain pouring in at the windows, and thunder crashed and rolled like berserk kettledrums, echoing on the bluffs around us. Here the storms don't have just one or two loud cracks as they do in the city, but just keep on and on. I ran to close the windows, wincing every time the lightning flashed, outlining the trees in vivid greenish blue. My aunt and uncle could be heard rushing around elsewhere in the house. Suddenly the room lit up and shuddered with a terrific impact, then the dark returned. I flipped the light switch, but nothing happened. Rhiannon stood by the window, looking out. Another streak, and she turned toward me, her face lurid with glee. I saw a winged black thing flapping at her shoulder and I stepped back in fright. But just then Uncle Peter came into the room to see that we were all right and to bring us some candles. The winged thing had fled the quavery candlelight, and I decided it was only a shadow created by the lightning.

"Never mind, Dad," Rhiannon told him calmly, "I have candles

here on my dresser. This happens too often out here not to be prepared."

How organized she was! I never would have thought of that.

In the morning my aunt and uncle drove into town, leaving the two of us alone. Uncle Peter had some business to transact that he ordinarily would have done over the phone, but since the storm that wasn't working either. Aunt Megan decided she'd take the opportunity to look at some dress goods.

After they left Rhiannon turned to me with her sweetest smile. "I'm sorry about your kitten," she said.

"No, you're not!" I blurted out. "You know who did it!"

"Yes, I do," she replied blandly. "It was Mother, but don't tell her—she'd feel bad. You know how absent-minded she is. She was going to bake cookies, so she turned the oven on. Then she got busy with the wash and forgot to make the cookies."

"But that doesn't explain how the kitten got in there," I said suspiciously.

"She had the door open earlier because she had cleaned the grates and wanted to let the cleaner fumes out. The kitten must have crawled in then and didn't have a chance to jump out when she closed the door and lit the gas. Now say you're sorry you accused me."

When Rhiannon was in a mood like this she could charm me into believing almost anything.

"Okay, I'm sorry," I said hesitantly.

Then she suggested we play hide and seek. I felt a vague distrust, but she was so ingratiating that I ignored it.

It was my turn first. I sandwiched myself in between some clothes bags in the closet under the stairs, where it was uncomfortably stuffy and I was soon wishing that she would hurry up and find me. Or had she just gone off and left me? It would be like her. I was reassured by the slam of the back door and her footsteps going down into the cellar. Did she think I'd hidden outside? It was too wet and muddy out there for that. I could

hear her moving around in the basement and giggled to think how far off the track she was.

Eventually she dug me out of my hiding place and it was my turn to go out on the sun porch and count to ten. With the last number barely out of my mouth I began my search. First I climbed the narrow stairs to the attic where shafts of dust-laden sunlight slanted through yellowed, filmy windowpanes. The arched backs of old-fashioned steamer trunks, probably brought from Wales by my grandparents, stood abandoned where the rafters angled down to the attic floor. I knew they held queer old clothes and household articles my grandmother had carefully and lovingly stored there. Someday perhaps Aunt Megan would let me go through them, but now I was on another errand. I peeked behind one trunk after another, but there was nothing there. The head and foot of a tarnished brass bed and old commode over in the corner were also innocent of quarry. I stood still and listened, sweat beginning to form on my back, for last night's storm had not broken the heat wave. All I could hear was my own breath, and when I held that, all sound ceased completely. If someone were lurking there, certainly a board would creak or clothes hanging on a pole near the commode would move slightly. More and more the total emptiness of the place pressed in on me. Besides, it was too light. Rhiannon would not be here.

I went back down to the bedrooms on the second floor, but they were imperturbable, their neatly made beds bathing in a morning sun that belied the violence of the night before. A quick check under each bed failed to produce her, and the closets were undisturbed. Rhiannon must be down in the cellar. Of course! That's what had taken her so long down there. She'd been trying to find a place to hide.

The back steps led down into deepening gloom, and I instinctively tried to switch on the lights before I remembered the lines were dead. It was an old house and the cellar floor was of hard-packed earth. Tools and other farm implements hanging

from nails in the beams overhead brushed me as I went past. Dim light was coming through the window wells, but many of the panes were broken and boarded up, so light was at a minimum. I stopped and listened. No, nothing. Maybe I just thought I heard something—but there, there it was again! A creaking of rusty hinges, and I thought I saw the lid of a huge, unused freezer chest move up and down slightly. I started toward it, then shrank back with a half-shriek as my bare foot touched something cold and slimy. My eyes, by now accustomed to the half-light, made out a small, mud-caked form. Purrcival! So that's what Rhiannon had been doing when she took so long to find me! A muffled sound of laughter issued from the chest. She'd moved the lid deliberately just so I would step in that direction! I snatched up the kitten's rigid body and ran up the steps, sobbing. Rhiannon could just wait for me. I hoped she wouldn't come after me as I wanted to bury Purrcival in some secret spot she couldn't find.

After I finished, I returned, determined to drag her from the freezer and have it out with her once and for all. She'd gone too far this time! But now the quiet in the cellar was shattered by sounds of pounding and screaming coming from the chest and the heavy lid no longer moved. Apparently she had let it down too far and the weight of it had—well, it served her right after what she'd done to my kitten, but I couldn't *leave* her in there. I took hold of the handle and tried to lift the cover, but it resisted me. Then, feeling it move grudgingly, I gave it a vicious yank—and the rusted metal came off in my hands. . . .

"That's not the way it was, Branwen, and you know it!"

Rhiannon! Even now I could remember the metallic note that always crept into her voice whenever she taunted me. I was standing in the center of Miss Lucinda's ballroom, where she had held her "ghost parties." Fingers of sunlight filtered through the stained-glass casement windows on the west side of the room, intensifying the blood-red walls with their outlines of black,

carved moldings, and making the room into the maw of a great monster. Lance, who had followed me up there, was rigidly erect, staring at me as though I were a stranger. A movement across the room startled me, but it was only my reflection in the blotched glass of a full-length antique mirror on the wall between the windows.

"You know what really happened, Branwen! Don't try to hide it from yourself anymore. It won't work!"

There it was again, hissing through the speaking tube. Or was it in my mind? Sounds have a way of detaching themselves from direction. An irresistible force drew me toward the mirror, where my features showed yellow and distorted in the old glass—*my* features? The eyes in the mirror glinted new-washed green. I tried to wrench away from them, to disclaim them, but they held me as once again I heard Rhiannon's mocking laughter coming from the chest. The kitten lay at my feet. She's a witch, I thought. She put Purrcival in the oven, but Gretel can do the same for her. For once I have her at my mercy! Impulsively I darted forward and slammed the lid shut. She began to pound and rattle the grills inside—well, let her! I'd let her out in a few minutes, but she could just suffer while I buried my kitten someplace where she'd *never* find him. It was a big freezer. There'd be plenty of air.

Digging in the soft ground and covering up the grave took less than ten minutes, but a growing uneasiness assailed me. Rhiannon would be furious and she'd tell Aunt Megan and there'd be the devil to pay. Worse—what would Uncle Peter think?

Thud-thud! The sides of the freezer visibly shook with her struggles. I grasped the handle and pulled, but suddenly it was lying in my hand, the rusty metal snapped in two. I looked at it curiously, then with realization came panic. Groping frantically around the dim basement, I sought something—anything that could break open or pry the lid. An old wrought-iron corn dryer hung from one of the rafters. I snatched it and tried to insert it

in the crevice between the lid and the chest, but the slender iron rod merely bent as I pushed on it. Over on the workbench I found an ice pick stuck into the scarred wooden top. Grabbing that and a screwdriver lying nearby, I went to work, but they slipped off the slick white surface. The saw I tried next wasn't any better.

I paused to get my breath, feeling the vibrations coming from inside the chest as I momentarily leaned against it, trying desperately to think. Her shrieks, bombarding my ears, sounded as though she were in a distant tunnel. What could I do? Where was there something that would—

Over there! That hammer on the wall! Holding it tightly, I tried to drive, first the pick and then the screwdriver, into the crack next to the lock—into the sides—into the lid, but nothing worked. Just a few dents and nicks. Frantically I clawed at the edge of the lid with nails and bare hands, reopening the gash in my hand on the remnant of rusty lock which held the chest closed.

Then, in the murk under the stairs, I made out the outlines of a sledgehammer, half hidden by stored junk. It was so heavy I could barely work it free, but finally I managed to drag it over to the chest. Mustering all my force, I lifted the unwieldy thing above my head—a feat I was unable to perform later—but that was the limit of my strength. The sledgehammer toppled ineffectually across the unyielding porcelain, gouging a long furrow on the white top. It was hopeless. I'd have to get help. Rhiannon's screams in my ears, I ran upstairs and tried the phone, but it was still out and the nearest neighbor was almost a mile away.

The road stretched up and down hill ahead of me, a gravelly, fleeing thing that clawed, scorched, and bruised my feet as I raced along it, hoping desperately that I could flag down a car. Here there were no houses, only rock-strewn bits of pasture interrupted at intervals by jagged, laminose shelf rock that overhung the road. A white schoolhouse, abandoned for the summer, of-

fered no help. Finally I heard the whine of a motor. It was a station wagon loaded with kids in the back. I guess the parents up front weren't bargaining for any more, because when they saw me signaling wildly they all waved back and went merrily on their way.

At last I stumbled up onto the porch of the neighbor's house and banged on the door. Chickens clucked in the barnyard, a dog barked inside, and I thought I heard footsteps approaching the door, but they were the imagined steps you often hear on knocking at the door of an empty house. Running around to the rear I saw the vacant space in the shed where the car should be. Reeling with panic and exhaustion, I pushed on to the next farm.

While his wife was calling the sheriff, the farmer brought me back in his truck. I led him down into the silent cellar. He attacked the chest with the crowbar he'd brought along, pried open the lid, and pulled Rhiannon out onto the floor. Her head rolled sideways and she lay there, staring at me with those pale green eyes, empty now, her fingers bloodied and her fingernails ripped to the quick. The man got down on his knees and began clumsily to breathe into her mouth. For a moment I thought she was going to respond. Her eyes seemed to widen and glow, but then I heard, or imagined I did, one long expulsion of air, and immediately afterward the sheriff and some other men came clattering down the stairs. Later the coroner said that if we'd gotten there five minutes earlier she might have been saved.

My story to the sheriff was simple, logical, straightforward—and untrue! But no one ever thought to doubt me. I told him that Rhiannon had hidden in the freezer and somehow the cover must have closed down on her, for when I came down into the basement I heard her pounding inside and was unable to free her after the handle broke off, in spite of everything I tried. I omitted the part about the kitten, because I thought it would grieve her parents unnecessarily, and the truth about who really shut the lid would have devastated my parents and maybe even

killed my mother, who had always been frailer than Aunt Megan. Nor would knowing my part in the "accident" have done my aunt and uncle any good either. It hurt to see them blaming themselves for leaving that old freezer in the cellar, but did my guilt make theirs any the less? Would knowing the truth bring their daughter back? Might they not even think I deliberately killed Rhiannon? Oh, Uncle Peter would have believed me, I think, but not Aunt Megan.

I struggled with my conscience all through the funeral when I had to sit with the family and look at her lying there in the open coffin, her heavy gold hair combed over her shoulders, her hands folded like a saint at her prayers. Nor did my conscience rest any easier for the realization that my grief arose, not out of sorrow for her, but out of regret that it was I who caused her death.

No, the truth wouldn't do anybody any good, I told myself over and over. I was the only one it could have saved, but I didn't know that then, and as I watched the dirt being shoveled down onto her coffin, I determined to bury the truth as irrevocably as she was being buried. I wanted to forget—and I did. So well that in later years I wondered why I could never bring myself to talk about her, and why the mere mention of her name would set my hands to shaking and a pulse hammering in my head.

"You murdered me, Branwen—you murdered me—"

The figure in the mirror was growing clearer and clearer, as if it had added a third dimension and was about to step out onto the floor. I reached out to push her back, but my hand had no substance, as though the corporeal had been drawn out of me into that being before me, which was becoming so solid that I could see its outlines right through my fingers. I felt I was slipping over the edge of the world, the cord that bound me to reality stretching taut and thin into one infinitesimal filament. But just as it seemed that it must break, a golden fury launched itself at the thing before me, snarling and snapping as though it expected to encounter a physical presence. Rhiannon receded into

the mirror, glaring at her attacker with fear and venom. As the glass brought Lance up short, I found myself staring at the reflection of an ashen face and fear-widened eyes. But they were blue, ordinary blue eyes, thank God! The room, too, was just a room, frowzy with peeling paint like a dispirited, jaded old bawd. I could feel the tension slowly seeping out of me as whatever it was that held me gradually let me go, and I sank to my knees and buried my head in the dog's curly neck.

4

Dinner and a show with Alan that night, some friends' anniversary party at their club the next evening, church Sunday morning, and a cookout at the home of Alan's partner Sunday afternoon rescued me from thinking, and life reasserted itself so that my memory of Friday afternoon's nightmare began to fade. By Monday morning I was able to face Alan's departure with at least a surface equanimity. Surely it had all been a dream, a kind of hallucination brought on by my overwrought imagination and built up by guilt feelings too long repressed. Well, now I had faced myself with it and I could view it with adult detachment—I thought. After all, I hadn't *intended* to kill Rhiannon, no matter how much I disliked her. It wasn't my fault that the handle was rusted, nor did I know that it was. Perhaps, I told myself, getting the whole thing out in the open once more was a sort of self-induced therapy, as though I were functioning as my own psychiatrist. Now it was up to me to accept the truth and go on from there. If only there were some avenue of redress open to me, it would be so much easier. But what? Confession? To whom? The wronged parties were all dead. Alan? What good

would that do? He had no part in this. Why burden him? Why run the danger of eroding his trust in me?

I went into my study, lined floor to ceiling with the books that had accumulated over the years. Books are a necessity to me, but they are addictive and I must regulate their dosage, for I could easily read my whole life away. Plumping myself down on the chaise longue by the window, I picked up the novel that Wes had sent and began to read, but again it failed to hold my attention. Just another tedious attempt to reproduce life in the jet set. I put the book down, aware I had been reading without my mental tape recorder turned on. I hadn't the slightest idea of what had gone on in the last three pages. I was, in fact, listening to the house. . . .

Any house will talk to you, if you'll let it, but old houses babble incessantly, which is not surprising. Did that floorboard creak from dryness or from a weightless step? Is that a mouse scuttling between the walls or fingers running over the keyboard of studs? Is it the wind that moans in the chimneys and around the gables and parapets on a windless day or is it . . . ?

The nostalgic glow that had first assailed me began to chill as the sensation of a presence near me crept down the back of my neck and arms and into the tips of my fingers, then down my spine to my toes. I turned around. Nothing. But the feeling persisted so strongly that the breath caught in my throat and I could stand it no longer. I fled outside and into the wood which ranges on either side of the ravine north of our house.

It was to this split in the lip of the bluff that I often retreated to watch and listen to the things of nature and supernature spilling forth. Today my hurrying feet scattered dry leaves left over from winter. Ferns and seedling trees brushed at my legs. A cold, black nose nuzzled my hand momentarily, then Lance was off in futile pursuit of a squirrel flashing across his path. The tiny animal scrambled up the trunk of an old oak just out of the dog's reach, its cheeks stuffed with last fall's acorns. Somewhere in the wood a flicker was busy with his pneumatic drill. Ants were

scurrying up and down the trunk of a maple, going to and from their herds of aphid cows, and in a branch high above me a goldfinch concluded an aria and darted away, a flash of lemon against the steep blue dike of the lake beyond.

By the time I reached the high outcropping of rock that jutted out toward the lake, the tension and fear had drained out of me and I sat down, my back against a smooth-barked beech. In most places the bluff slopes sharply, but not precipitously toward the lake. This promontory, however, had resisted the wear of time and was a thin sliver of high peninsula above the shore, like the overhanging prow of a ship, the underslung face of the cliff a sheer drop two hundred feet to the water below, where docile waves fondled protruding boulders with mermaid hands. The north side of the rock overlooked the ravine, and here the incline was more gradual, with layers of limestone laid bare at the top and a heavy coating of rich, moist earth farther down.

The topmost branches of a tree that was rooted in the slope stuck out above the crag where I sat. It always looked as if it were trying to climb on deck, espaliered as it was against the rock. It was a tree I couldn't identify, although its catkins resembled those of a birch, but its leaves were saw-toothed like elm leaves. I leaned over and patted one of its branches.

"One day, old fellow," I encouraged it, "you'll make it. You'll grow and grow, like Jack's beanstalk, and this old rock you've been trying to climb all these years will be nothing but a pebble to you."

The tree nodded as the branch rebounded from my grasp. Just then Lance burst from the wood and collapsed beside me, thrusting his big head into my lap and grunting blissfully as I stroked his soft fur. It was warm for a spring day and the continual wash of the waves, like a giant pulse, crept into my consciousness and gradually lulled me to sleep.

The next thing I remembered was waking up in my own bed to another day. Lance was curled up on Alan's bed. I shooed him off, got up and started to dress as usual. It took several minutes

for me to become alert enough to realize that my last waking memory was of leaning against the beech trunk, fondling Lance's long ears, and drowsily watching a white sail skim along the line dividing the sky from the darker blue of the lake. What had happened between then and now? As I reached in back to zip up my blouse, I was surprised to find how sore my muscles were again, especially my right arm. What had I been doing? Maybe some coffee would wake me up and then I'd remember—

I looked around the kitchen in dismay. Was it the bright morning light or had some chemical in the pink paint caused it to turn a bright orange? Yes, that must be it! And how I hated orange! Particularly here next to the pink in the wallpaper. Fuming, I picked up the phone and called the hardware store.

"Mr. Wolff," I blurted out when I heard his voice, "that paint you sold me appears to be unstable. It was a beautiful pink when I first applied it, but it's suddenly turned orange."

"But, Mrs. Ericsson," he answered, "I don't understand. You came in yesterday and bought some orange paint, remember? You even *told* me the pink didn't look good."

Luckily there were customers chattering in the background. I don't remember what I said. Whatever it was, I'm sure it didn't make sense—nothing could have in a situation like that. The library book and the review and now orange paint! And along with them, the incident in the ballroom. I wished I could believe they were unrelated or that there was a rational explanation—like somebody pulling a colossal practical joke on me that had triggered my imagination and jogged my memory.

Branwen, don't be ridiculous! Who would do such a thing even if they could?

But there had to be an explanation.

Does there?

Hypnosis! That would explain everything!

But who? Mrs. Lemke?

I laughed out loud.

Alan?

Yes, what about Alan?

Alan thinks hypnotism is sideshow stuff, you know that. Besides, how could he possibly know about Rhiannon?

Maybe I talked in my sleep.

To that extent? Absurd!

There was another possibility—

Witchcraft? In this day and age? Stop it, Branwen, you're getting morbid!

I started toward the garage where the trash barrel was kept. All the way out I knew what I'd find—and did—three empty cans marked ORANGE!

What was I to do? What would Alan think? I could just imagine Romy Wolff's thoughts about now: "I wonder if Mrs. Ericsson is a secret drinker." If that story got out along with the one about the library card—being a comparative newcomer to the town (not being a native, that is) I'd be all the more suspect! I just couldn't face Mr. Wolff to buy more paint. Besides, the orange was such a violent shade I was afraid it might bleed through an overlayer of pink. I'd have to call in professional help.

I was lucky. There was a painter available for the next day, which was Wednesday, so that by Thursday, which was Mrs. Lemke's day and also when Alan was due home, the kitchen would be pink again and there'd be no need for embarrassing explanations. I always paid the bills so Alan probably wouldn't even notice.

But what about me? Was this what happened in nervous breakdowns? Or worse? Schizophrenia?

Oh no, not me! Not even people I know! Just nameless, faceless thousands who have nothing to do with me!

Like the people I'd seen in state mental institutions when I did a series of stories on them. All I could remember was their eyes—eyes that look beyond, not at you—great, luminous, withdrawn eyes—Picasso eyes in the snake pit!

Don't be melodramatic! Snake pits are a thing of the past!

But Alan mustn't know. How long could things like this go on without his finding out? What would he do?

They say people who fear they are going mad don't.

I must hang on to that. I must fight this thing within me—if it is within me. Maybe there's some perfectly natural explanation—

Or supernatural? So I had come back to that! Well, what about it? Plenty of rational, enlightened people have believed in England's ghosts. Miss Lucinda was jilted by her lover. Mightn't her bitterness have left a pall of evil over the place? Or perhaps she lingered here, resenting the intrusion of strangers?

The painter arrived at eight thirty the next morning by the kitchen clock. He was so tall I wondered if he had Watusi blood in him, for, with his finely chiseled, patrician features, he might have stepped out of an Egyptian tomb painting. I could picture him as a tribal king seated on his chair of kneeling humans, a leopard skin about his loins, a white feathered headdress cresting his head, and slaves diligently fanning him with palm leaves.

"You're so very tall," I remarked as, standing on the floor, he deftly drew his brush across the top of one of the cabinets. "Did you ever think of going out for basketball?"

He gave a wry grin.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, pausing to dip his brush. "I was in pro basketball as a rookie, but I wrecked my knee and it never did heal right, so here I am."

"What a shame!"

"Sure is. I needed that money to finance myself through a doctorate in biochemistry. Now I guess it's going to take a little longer, especially since I'm married."

"Do you have any children?"

"Yes'm, a little boy. He'll be a year old in August."

I thought of the box of toys in the hall closet—there were even some that Timmy had never used, like the football Alan bought him. I had never been able to part with them, but what was the use of their gathering dust? I turned to speak to the painter

again, noticing as I did so that it wasn't even nine o'clock yet and he was well into the first bank of cabinets.

"I have some. . . ."

The clock caught my gaze again. Seven thirty! Impossible! A clock can't go backwards. Then I realized that the painter was gone and so were his ladder and equipment and I was standing in the kitchen quite alone. Lights were burning and it was dark outside. The cabinets gleamed pink again. Through the open door I could see that the butler's pantry had been finished, too. My checkbook lay open on the table. I picked it up and thumbed the pages to the last stub—yes, I had written a check for the paint contractor, although I scarcely recognized my own handwriting.

Then I remembered the toys. They were still in the closet. Too bad! Where had the day gone? In fact, what day *was* it? How could I be sure that only eleven hours had passed? The newspaper! That would tell me. As I headed out the back door toward the road, Lance rose up from the step outside where he had been lying. Good boy! He hadn't run away—but he must be hungry!

At the paper box I hurriedly unfolded the paper and turned my flashlight on it. Yes, it was Wednesday's edition, I saw with relief. But what about the painter—had he noticed anything different about me? Apparently I had functioned well enough to write him a check in the correct amount, but this time the blackout had come when I was wide awake and—and talking to someone. Lance nudged me. I handed him the paper, but I shivered as I did so. How could I trust myself anywhere?

5

NEVER BEFORE IN my life had I felt as lonely and helpless as I did standing there on the path between the paper box and the house. How could I go back inside where something waited and watched? I longed to take flight, to leave everything behind and walk and walk until I came to the other side of the darkness surrounding the house. Surely there would be light and comfort and friendly people to drive away the shadows. I advanced a few uncertain steps up the walk, jumping back when something brushed my cheek. It was only a wisp of willow overhanging the walk, and I laughed—shakily. To the east the moon was rising out of the lake, trailing a bridge of light to the shore. If only I could follow that bridge across the waters and out of reach of memory and guilt and fear. It would be so simple. No launch, no orbiting, just a simple stroll across that luminous span. But then the black silhouette of a sailboat knifed through my bridge and severed my escape route.

A brisk wind had risen and cold, not courage, drove me back into the house. After setting some dinner down for Lance, I picked up the kitchen phone and put my finger in the dial. I wanted to hear a human voice. Maybe my friend Sue wouldn't

be busy and I could drop over for a chat. Then I remembered—this was PTA night and she was president. If Timmy had lived, I'd be there, too. Well, what about Ellie? No, this was her bowling night. And Barbara would be at choir practice.

I reshuffled my list of prospects—hmmmm, I could call up Millie next door. Maybe she'd invite me over—hardly likely! Even our egg- and sugar-borrowing relations had been suspended after Lance had disgraced her lawn one day, although I apologized and picked it up with a shovel. Millie hated dogs and was a fussbudget anyway. Besides, what good would it do? I'd have to come home sooner or later. I could hardly spend the night.

Till tomorrow then—how to get to tomorrow when Alan would be home? How to get through those crawling hours? Why, why did he have to be in a profession that took him away so much? I'd spent so much of my life alone. Everyone, they say, is lonely, but an only child is more aware of it, I think, having more time to ponder the oddities of nature and life. I remember how astounded I was when Mother taught me that we see only indirectly through two minuscule lenses, our pupils. She told me this to warn me to be careful of my eyes, but I thought about it for hours. If this was so, then everything I saw was sort of a moving picture of reality, not reality itself. Then what *was* real? With childish egoism I could think of only one answer. Myself. An answer I didn't like, so I rejected it, as I had no desire to be singular in the universe. Nothing could be more lonely than that.

My aunt and uncle died while I was in high school, my father during my junior year in college, and my mother, who developed breast cancer like Aunt Megan had earlier, barely lived to see me get my degree. Cast adrift from my world, I entered that of others. I became a cub reporter, dated and had friends, but the sense of belonging eluded me—until Alan came into my life, and then the baby. They weren't celluloid characters in a film being run off for my benefit. They were real and I belonged again.

Only now Timmy was gone—and so was Alan in a different way, but he'd be back—if I could just get through those hours!

A high-pitched squeal interrupted my thoughts. The phone was giving its off-the-hook signal. I dropped it back in place and glanced around the kitchen, which was a small safety island in the labyrinth of shadow. At first I was tempted to spend the night within the perimeter of this oasis, but that would be giving in to my fears and once I did that I was lost, because every night that Alan was away would be the same. Besides, the gloom lurking beyond the door was beginning to draw a straitjacket of claustrophobia about me. If light brought safety, then I would flood the house with it, driving away the specters in an electrical exorcism. First I flipped on the basement light at the head of the stairs—if I had had to go down the steps to do so I don't think I would have had the nerve. Then I marched through the rooms, switching on lights as I went.

I didn't intend to go any farther than the second floor, but once the bedrooms were illumined, even the closets, I found myself inexorably drawn to the old ballroom overhead. The wind had gone wild and was keening around the corners and sighing into the speaking tubes. A branch tapped at a window. Lance, padding along by my side, was my courage. If there was danger, he would sense it.

I climbed to the third floor, noticing how deep the stairwell was and how the balusters cast a pattern of elongated stripes on the opposite wall. Suddenly I knew why Miss Lucinda had given all those phantom parties and kept the house lighted up. Poor, frightened, lonely old soul! And I had laughed at her!

I compelled myself to open the door to the black void of the ballroom—I hadn't been up there since my encounter with, well, whatever it was—and groped along the edge of the wall for the switch. The light from the single low-watt bulb in the room made the peeling paint look more scabrous than ever, and the network of cracks covered the walls like an enormous spider web. Blackened bulbs in the other sockets told what a battery of exorcism

Miss Lucinda had once used against the shadows, but one by one they had failed her, until only this one was left, and we had never bothered to replace the others. I turned back toward the door, only to wheel around again as the sensation of something breathing down my neck overwhelmed me. Lance snorted and gave a low growl, the hair on his back standing on end. A force stronger then I was trying to assert itself. The wind in the speaking tubes seemed to be forming syllables—*Rhi-an-non, Rhi-an-non.* The force grew in potency and no matter which way I turned it seemed to be behind me. I had a fleeting glance of my terrified face in the mirror and the impression of a dark aura surrounding me. . . .

The next thing I knew I was standing back down in the hall on the first floor without any memory of having descended the stairs. Lance was crouched at the end of the hall, his long nose strangely averted. I called to him to come to me, but he didn't move. Then I saw blood dripping from his lip, but when I tried to examine him he shrank from my touch, looking up at me with hurt in those great brown eyes of his.

"Steady there, fellow!" I tried to soothe him. "Let me see your lip—why, how did you get that cut?"

My engagement ring sparkling in the hall light as I stroked his head drew my glance to my left hand. A smear of blood trailed across the back of my hand and onto the cuff of my jersey. At first I thought I must have scratched myself, but when I wiped it off there was no wound underneath. This had to be Lance's blood! What had I done while I was momentarily out? I inspected his mouth again. The cut on his lip might well have come from the rip of a sharp diamond—oh, Lance, Lance! I wrapped my arms around him and rocked and fondled him like a baby. He whined softly and his great feather duster of a tail signaled his forgiveness.

After I had stanched the blood with Alan's styptic pencil, I went into the living room and tuned the stereo in to my favorite classical station, smiling wryly at myself. Shades of Miss Lu-

cinda's gramophone! It's strange how even under stress the mind will note and react to the irony, even humor of a situation. Strange, but helpful, a counterbalance to panic, enabling one to go about one's business in a reasonably normal way. Thus, I sat down with the novel I was supposed to review, grimly determined to finish it at one sitting. I would read until daylight and then maybe—maybe if I tired myself out I would fall asleep.

I had already turned to Chapter Three when I realized that all I knew of what I was reading was that the action was somehow flitting from stateroom to stateroom aboard a luxury yacht and that somebody was going to be murdered. I laid it aside, deciding to have it out with myself. I might as well ask the question I had been avoiding. Was I losing my mind? Was *I* schizophrenic? How else could I explain what I had done to Lance? What had possessed me?

Possessed! Is that it?

Preposterous! I told myself. Such things didn't exist. It was more likely a form of amnesia.

Yes, amnesia! That makes sense!

Or did it? Was it amnesia that whispered in the speaking tubes? Could amnesia induce me to hurt the dog I loved so much?

I looked down at the diamond on my hand. That had drawn blood tonight, not of my will, but wasn't I to blame anyway? What if I were to commit a crime during one of my blank periods —would I be responsible? No, because it would not have been my intent. Or would that stand up in court?

Yet if I was aware of a problem and kept it a secret, then wouldn't I be responsible? But if I went to a psychiatrist, he might have me—no, I wouldn't go! I would fight it myself. I would will it away and the thing would be gone.

The stereo died at the midnight hour of sign-off, and for a moment the pulse of the whole world seemed suspended. Then suddenly the house clamored with the striking of the grandfather clock I'd bought at an auction. Who had wound it? Its tick was

like a noisy heart murmur, and since I bought it more for ornament than use, I had deliberately let it run down after one nerve-wracking session of the "telltale heart"—nine—ten—eleven—twelve—and old Grandfather reverted to his systole. Outside, where the wind had subsided into a low moan, a phantom fingernail lightly raked a window screen—a lilac twig, I reassured myself. The furnace roared on, a faucet dripped somewhere, time ticked on relentlessly. . . .

Then Lance, who had been dozing at my feet, sat up abruptly, his ears quivering, every muscle taut, staring at nothing across the room, and now, on the cusp of a new day, I was at one with him, all the intervening centuries of trained skepticism draining out of me, and somewhere in the dark corners of my mind a drum was beating. . . .

As the wind was silenced and the fingernail ceased, the furnace clicked off, the pendulum fibrillated, then suspended its motions, the faucet held its drip, and everything was deathly still.

Then it came—the taunting, almost childlike monotone in the speaking tube, like an acolyte intoning:

"*Branwen—Rhi-an-non—Bran-wen—Rhi-an-non—*" faster and louder until the two names became one word—"*Bran-wen-rhi-an-non—Branwenrhiannon*"—still faster until some of the syllables dropped out, "*Branwenon-Branwenon!*"

A humming incantation filled the room, swelling and diminishing with the ebb and flow of the voice. My senses reeled with its momentum. Lance! Where was Lance? A little gold kitten lay on the floor in front of me, its pink tongue hanging out of its mouth, its tiny paws outstretched, and my hands were forcing a white porcelain slab down onto it—only it wasn't a kitten anymore, it was Rhiannon and her face was blue, her tongue lolled from the corner of her mouth, her hands were reaching toward me, the nails broken and bloody, and her eyes frozen in a look of horror and accusation. I shut my eyes and pressed my hands to my ears, but the scene persisted on the interior of my eyelids and the voice penetrated my hands—"*Branannon—Branannon—*

Brhiannon–Brhiannon–Rhiannon–Rhianno–" then broke off into the cruel, mocking laughter I had once known so well.

I don't know what I would have done if Lance's joyful barking hadn't shattered the moment. Then a rasp of tires on the gravel driveway and I was running toward the garage. Alan! What was he doing home so soon? It didn't matter. All that mattered was that he was there, the benison of his arms around me.

"Branwen, darling, you're shivering!" he said as I nestled in his embrace. "You shouldn't have run out without a coat. Darling, you're half-choking me! You're almost as wild as Lance. Here, let me get my bag out of the car and then it's inside with you before you catch cold."

I clung to his free arm as we walked to the house. Just touching him was my release from the past hours. Before we were halfway he stopped suddenly, looking up.

"Hey, what's the idea?" he wanted to know. "You've got the house lighted up like a Christmas tree. You have stock in the electric company or something?" It was such a stale joke, but right now it seemed hilarious.

"I wanted to celebrate your coming home so early." I laughed, then caught my breath and looked at him apprehensively. How stupid of me! I had no way of knowing he'd be home early. I scratched around in my brain wildly for some plausible answer to the question I was sure would be forthcoming.

But he didn't ask it. Instead he hustled me into the kitchen, where he slung his bag in the corner and sat down at the table, then looked around and sniffed the heavy air.

"Say, it takes a long time for the smell to go out of that paint, doesn't it?" he commented.

"Yes–yes, it does," I replied, puzzled at his lack of curiosity. Either he was ignoring my slip of the tongue or he just hadn't noticed it. I should have left well enough alone, but my curiosity got the better of me.

"I'll bet you didn't expect to find me up and waiting for you," I said.

"Oh, I don't know," he answered. "You usually do. In fact, I rather hoped you'd have the coffee pot on. A nice hot cup would be just the thing right now."

"Of course, dear, I'm sorry," I apologized, plugging in the percolator. Had he written a letter I hadn't gotten? Or had I misunderstood which day he'd be back? No, that wasn't possible, because he specifically told me Thursday several times.

"Did you write me this week?" I questioned him, hoping to solve the riddle.

"No, I didn't. Been too damn busy. Glad I didn't take the time now. I got here before any letter would have. Why?"

Then how was I supposed to have known? Why was he taking me so for granted?

"You and I must be communicating by two-way ESP," I finally volunteered.

"You mean AT and T, don't you?" he corrected me, then began to laugh. "Oh, now I get it! That *was* a lousy phone connection we had this afternoon. You didn't sound like yourself at all."

6

In the scurry of events during the next few days I was able to regain a certain amount of calm. Alan suggested that I go to Colorado with him for his final weeks on the dam project.

"It's beautiful country out there," he said. "I won't be busy all the time and we can have a halfway vacation together. We'll drive out so that we can take Lance with us."

"You didn't tell me the dam is almost completed," I remarked, surprised.

He frowned. "I thought I did—yes, I did, too—last time I came home, don't you remember? You asked me when it would be finished. You said you were getting tired of hearing about the damn dam, that it was about time I gave more attention to you."

I had no memory of such a conversation, but I wasn't going to let him know that.

"Oh yes, of course—I'd just forgotten for the moment."

"Anyway, about all that's left now is the cleanup and the dedication ceremonies. The governor of the state will be there and some Congressmen. If they're going to be making political hay, I might as well be there to put a plug in for the firm."

"And after that you'll be in town for a while?" I asked hopefully.

"Until the next job."

"Oh." I was afraid to ask the obvious question, but he saw my hesitation and answered it for me.

"No, it won't be South America. We turned that down for something better."

"In Wisconsin?" I put in eagerly.

"Not that close. It's a bridge in Kentucky."

I said nothing.

"What's wrong with Kentucky?" he wanted to know.

"You'll still be away all week. If it was South America you'd just have to take me along."

"And what about Lance?"

"He could come, too."

He laughed. "You had it all figured out, didn't you? What's the matter? Don't you like it here? You were so crazy about the house when we bought it."

"I still love it." It was a half-truth. "But it needs you in it."

Packing, making arrangements, and then the long drive out to Colorado affected me like a powerful tranquilizer, dulling my painful memories and creating a euphoric present. We checked in at a motel perched precariously on a steep slope, from which we could look out over the valley at the other mountains ranged around us, like sleeping elephants with snowy howdahs on their backs. Early in the morning a low-lying fog would often obliterate the valley, and the peaks projecting above it were islands in a sea of mist. My old world was dropping away, as earth does from an ascending rocket, and the giddying effect of the thin air made me feel as though I were walking in the light gravity of the moon.

Nothing was real but our small triangle here in the mountains —Alan, Lance, and me. I felt gloriously, vibrantly alive, beyond reach of memory and conscience. No wonder the Greeks had

placed their gods on Mount Olympus. One can be a god in the mountains and the gods are conscienceless.

As the weeks slid by, I began to be aware that this sense of apotheosis, this titan vigor, was due to something besides geographic change. The dizziness and nausea I felt in the mornings could no longer be attributed to the altitude. There was no doubt about it. The triangle was to become a quadrangle and the realization of this brought with it such a feeling of invincibility, of oneness with all the creative forces of the universe, that nothing seemed to ruffle my equanimity, not even the thought that very soon our moonwalk would be concluded and I must return to the house where an unseen presence awaited me.

A Senator flew in from Washington to dedicate the dam, a senior Senator whose aplomb with the ladies had long been legendary. As he stood next to my sturdy, clean-lined husband, I wondered what women saw in this paunchy politician with walrus-hide bags under his eyes. Here was the self-designated male sex symbol fighting a losing battle to maintain his image, which was evident in the clandestine marriage of dye and toupee to produce dark-red wavy hair and curly sideburns, and the faint lines of a girdle showing under his trousers. At the cocktail party that evening, after a brief introduction, I turned from him, bent on enjoying the occasion with Alan, but everywhere I went I could feel the Senator's eyes following me.

The next morning Alan left to conduct the honored visitors on an inspection tour of the dam and I began to pack. I didn't feel well, but I blamed my aching head on the champagne, although two glasses were hardly sufficient for a hangover. Lance dozed by the sunlit window, his nose and ears twitching as though he were chasing a rabbit. I recall smiling at him, but even that was painful, so I took the suitcase off the bed and lay down. . . .

It was the dog's enraged barking in the bathroom which woke me.

"How did Lance get in there?" I wondered vaguely, not want-

ing to move my throbbing head. The scrape of the traverse rod being closed aroused me. Outlined against the thinly opaque drapes was a man's heavy body. His coat and tie were off and his shirt unbuttoned. He was unbuckling his belt as he came toward me.

"Why, Senator, what are you doing here?" My first impulse was not terror but a desire to laugh at an utterly ludicrous, absurd situation.

He hesitated, his confidence and his chins sagging a little.

"Come on now, baby," he said, with just a hint of menace in his tone, "don't tell me you're one of those teasers who let a man get so far and then try to pull the innocent bit."

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

"You've been giving me the come-on ever since we met yesterday," he said, turning the covers aside. "You didn't fool me with that distant treatment last night. You just wanted to play hard-to-get—I knew that. So I ducked the tour this morning and came over. And sure enough, when you came to the door, honeychild, the look you gave me was answer enough."

"*I* didn't open the door. I've been asleep. How dare you come in here!" I flared back at him.

"Come on, doll, quit the kidding! You don't have to be coy with me." He sat down beside me and ran his hairy hand over the negligee where it covered my knee. "Hey, I like this!"

I stared at him, unbelieving.

"Let's see what's underneath it." He moved to slip his hand under the chiffon, but I slid out of the other side of the bed, only to be caught by the wrist. I tried to wrench away, but he held me.

"Let go of me! I didn't answer the door and you know it. I've been sleeping here all morning."

A look of bewilderment came over his florid face for a moment, then he grinned. "Now you know, honey," he drawled, "I could never have gotten in here by myself and shut that big dog up in the bathroom without some help from you."

I knew he was right. Lance wouldn't have let him in. I felt as though I were going to vomit. It would have served him right.

Mistaking my silence for acquiescence, he tried to pull me down beside him.

"Take your hands off her and get the hell out of here!"

Alan stood in the doorway, his fists ready, his lips tight. "Be thankful I don't turn you over to the police."

The Senator was at least a gentleman according to his personal code, such as it was.

"I–I'm sorry," he stammered apologetically. "I must have gotten into the wrong unit–they all look alike, you know. I had a date with a young lady–she said she'd leave the door open. You know how these things are. Well, I didn't have my glasses on and I mistook your lovely wife for the other lady."

By now he had himself pretty well together again. After picking up his coat and hat, he paused at the door.

"I'd appreciate your not mentioning anything about this–I'm sure you understand. Any time you're looking for work for your firm in the way of government projects, just let me know."

He rammed his hat on his head and scuttled out, mumbling to himself. Alan slammed the door, stood there fuming a moment, then relaxed and began to laugh. I relaxed, too.

"What a story that would make for the gossip columns," he said finally, wiping his eyes. "I'll bet that old coot is scared to death."

"So was I," I reminded him.

"Of course, sweetheart, but really–you were managing very well," he commented, putting his arms around me. "You've probably deflated his ego for all of two days. Say, how in the dickens did he ever manage to shut Lance in the bathroom without getting bitten?"

"He didn't," I said, groping for a plausible lie. "I lay down because I had a terrible headache, but Lance wanted to romp. He kept jumping on the bed and trying to lick my face so I put him in there. I didn't realize you hadn't locked the front door."

Oh, Lance, how I maligned you!

"I thought you didn't get headaches out here in the mountain air."

This was the perfect time to tell him.

"I hadn't until today," I replied, "but this is different. Maybe liquor doesn't agree with me right now. I'm pregnant, Alan. I was going to tell you."

7

THE SENATOR DID me one favor. He made it easier for me to climb down from Mount Olympus and head homeward. Valhalla had been breached. Now I knew that the trouble was in me, not the house, so it didn't matter where I was. The realization of this hammered at my mind as we sped eastward, ironing out the mountains into flat prairie land. Alan must have wondered at my unwonted quiet, but I had to think—to try to reason out the events of the past two months.

My thoughts offered me no escape or solution. I was harboring another person—a person whose one purpose seemed to be to destroy me.

Oh, God, I didn't mean to kill her!

How would Alan react if I were to confide in him?

Oh, I want to, my darling, but your thinking is so precise, so mathematical and pragmatic—I don't even know how to broach the subject—

"Alan, what is the mind?"

Not the usual question to come out of limbo while hurtling down a highway at seventy-five miles an hour. Alan didn't quite take it in.

"What is what?" he asked absently, taking a cigarette from his shirt pocket.

I pushed in the lighter for him. "The mind," I repeated, "what is it?"

He had a reprieve while I held the lighter to his cigarette. He inhaled slowly, reflectively.

"Well?" I prodded.

"Uh—the mind is—well, it's thought, memory—our mental processes—say, that's a hell of a question to ask right in the middle of Nebraska. What brought that up?"

"Oh, I was just wondering—and thinking. Riding along like this, with nothing to do but count the exit signs always makes me philosophical, particularly without Burma Shave signs to offer a laugh every few miles. Go on, Alan, how do you define the mind? Is it the product of the brain or is the brain the product of the mind?"

He laughed. "Well, I have to hand it to you, darling, you've picked a topic that should last all the way home. What got you off on this track?"

"I—was thinking about the baby, and then it occurred to me that if it already has a brain, then it must also have a mind, but the question is, which comes first?"

"Like the chicken or the egg?"

"Yes—but a lot more important. To paraphrase Descartes, do we think because we have a brain or does the brain think because it has us?"

"Does it really matter?"

"Very much. You see, if the mind comes first—before the physical—then maybe it existed all along and will continue to exist, no matter what happens to the body."

"Look, Branwen"—Alan slapped the wheel impatiently—he hates not knowing the answers to things—"I'm a civil engineer. I measure life with a slide rule and I was never long on philosophy. If you want a so-called scientific answer—if you consider philosophy a science—then I'm Mr. Wrong."

"No, I don't want a scientific answer because I doubt if there is one. I want *your* opinion."

"In other words, is there an afterlife? Sure, I've asked myself that question. I'm not an atheist. I believe in a Supreme Being. But as for my personal survival in another world—that's another matter. Am I just one of nature's robots, sprung from a sequence of cellular developments, or am I a personality—with a soul that will continue to exist after death? The first alternative insults my ego, the second insults my intelligence—almost. I don't think materialists have all the answers. I guess I take the middle road. I wouldn't want to bet on an afterlife, but I do feel that the mind —or personality—is something which transcends the physical. Let's say it's an intangible quantity that programs the brain as though it were a computer."

I was still miles away from what I really wanted to talk about, but if I could just keep him at this, the topic might come up naturally.

"Where does the mind come from when a baby is born?" I persisted. "Are there lots of them floating around, waiting for brains to be conceived so they can attach themselves to them?"

"Now you're getting into religion. What you're talking about is the soul. Ask our pastor."

"Soul—mind, is there any difference? As for our pastor, would he know any more than you or I?" This wasn't getting me anywhere. I had to move in with what I was really talking about.

"What if a mind—or soul—was suddenly deprived of its body, like when Timmy died—do you think it might try for another?"

We were passing a lumbering semi. I could feel the air from the truck vainly trying to suck us in.

"Now you're talking about reincarnation," he said. "That I don't believe in at all!"

"Not exactly reincarnation," I replied. "Oh, I know it's wild, but let's just suppose that a person died, a person with tremendous willpower, and that person's mind were to will itself into another person's brain."

"What are you trying to do—collect material for a science fiction novel?"

Good out! For a coward like me. "Well, something of the sort. Anyway, it could explain some so-called cases of schizophrenia, couldn't it?" I took a tape cartridge out of the glove compartment. "This has eight tracks on it," I said, "two to a recording, giving you four musical compositions, all different from each other. Couldn't the brain be thought of as a kind of recording tape? And in that case, mightn't more than one mind record its thought processes on it?"

He reached his hand over and felt my forehead.

"Nope, no fever," he diagnosed. "Must be just an acute case of pregnancy. Okay, my Number One mind has been informing me for some time that I'm hungry, while Number Two mind just read that sign indicating a food stop ahead. Having fed the products of my two minds into my mental computer, I have decided it's time for lunch. Do you think you could put your two heads together long enough to accept my invitation?"

"Alan, you're a nut!"

"Look who's talking!"

I laughed, but inside I was sad. The moment had come and gone.

But it was to come again—fate was treating me better than I deserved. The hang-up was myself.

We laid over an extra day in Omaha because Alan wanted to see a contractor there. While he was gone, I went shopping. I couldn't resist buying some baby things and a couple of maternity dresses, although I didn't need them yet. When I returned to the motel I found Alan there, watching TV. I caught a flash of Fredric March's handsome face on the screen as I walked past Alan into the bathroom. Emerging from the shower a little later I saw that Fredric March's face had been replaced by that of a ravening monster.

"*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,*" I observed as the commercial came on.

"That's right," he said. "I couldn't find a baseball game, so I got hooked on this instead. Want to catch the last segment? It's about this doctor who—"

"I know," I interrupted. "I saw it last month on the late, late show, but I don't mind seeing it again."

After Dr. Jekyll and his alter-ego had been dispatched, I brought out my packages. Alan inspected the baby things, approving them with masculine reserve, then pulled another package out of my shopping bag.

"What's this?" he wanted to know.

I stared at it, trying to recollect if I had bought anything else. It was flat and square and wrapped in plain purple paper. As I ripped it open I could feel the bevel of a frame—an oil painting of a huge black crow brooding over the nest of some smaller bird, broken eggshells lying in the straw. I looked up at Alan, helpless for an explanation.

"That doesn't look like your taste in art, darling," he remarked.

"It most certainly isn't!" I exclaimed, pushing it from me in revulsion. "I haven't the slightest idea where it came from. I—I didn't buy it. Maybe somebody put it in my shopping bag by mistake while I was trying on the dresses—or maybe I picked it up accidentally with my other packages."

"Branwen, the shoplifter!" he teased.

"I'll have to take it back—what a nuisance!" I moaned. "I wonder if there's a sales slip in here. Did you ever see anything so ugly?"

"Well, it's not exactly the sort of thing I'd like to see hanging in the nursery—or anywhere else in the house for that matter. Are the stores open tonight?"

"I don't know," I said, rummaging for a sales slip.

"I'll take it back," he offered, putting on his coat. "I don't think you should run around too much. What's the name of the store?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," I replied. "There isn't any sales slip in here. What'll we do with it?" I shivered. "I don't want it around, Alan. It's like a bad omen. Can't we just throw it away?"

"No, it belongs to somebody."

"Only the artist could love it," I quipped, still searching the folds of wrapping paper for a receipt. This time I felt something. I took a quick look and let the paper fall across my hand.

"Maybe somebody at the motel office will know what store uses that color paper. Let me rewrap it," he said, reaching for it. "I'll take it down and ask them."

I pulled it back. "No—no, I'll wrap it." I had to think of something to keep him from delivering it himself, in case the motel clerk knew where the store was. "B-but don't bother to return it yourself. You've had a long day and it's still hot outside. Besides, if it's an art gallery, it probably wouldn't be open now. The manager could call them tomorrow and tell them the package is here."

"That's a good idea," he assented.

Yes, wasn't it? After he was gone, I went into the bathroom, opened my fist, and let the Master-charge slip with my signature on it drop into the toilet and flushed it down.

8

I SOARED HIGH OVER *the puckered sea, my white pinions beating toward the sun—drifting with the air currents, rising and falling, dipping in and out of the clouds, feeling their chill, moist breath. The sea slid away and now it was land beneath me, curly green with trees, scarred with the monstrous weals of mountains. Golden wings came sweeping the zenith above me and I fled with gladness in my heart—fled, but not too fast—gulping huge drafts of air with my wings, but the gold one overtook me and we rose to the impulse of our nuptial flight, riding the winds and gliding down a shaft of light to a rosy pinnacle, where, with his great aureate wings, he covered me.*

There we lingered, he brooding beside me with his massive dark gold head on my shoulder, but I, looking down, saw my wings go black and the ache of desire for him consuming me. My talons flexed, hungry for his flesh—oh, the horror and the ecstasy of sacrifice! His pliant neck contracted in my frenzied grip—only it wasn't I! I was a heap of white feathers being swept over the edge. . . .

"Branwen! Branwen!"

The black thing had me by the shoulders, but I tore myself free and flailed at it.

"Branwen, wake up!" Alan's face swam into my vision and I heard a scream ending in midair. Alan. It was Alan shaking me. The first unobtrusive light of dawn seeping through the drapes outlined his ashen face.

"You awake now, darling?" he was saying.

Shaking my head, I tried to retain the last shreds of dream that were slipping away from me.

"Wow! That was some nightmare you were having!" he exclaimed. "You scared me out of my wits!"

"I–I thought–I mean–there was something black and it was choking you–and I couldn't stop it because I was nothing but feathers–"

"Something was choking me all right, but it was you, Branwen."

I opened my eyes wide and for the first time saw the red welts on his neck.

"Oh–oh, I'm sorry! You mean, I did that?" I was incredulous.

"You sure did! That's the last time I'm ever going to let you watch a horror movie."

"Did I really choke you? I thought it was just in the dream–and it wasn't me, it was the other."

"You did more than dream, honey. Here I was, sound asleep, and I felt someone kissing me. 'That's nice,' I thought and turned to put my arms around you. But just then you grabbed me around the neck and began to squeeze, digging your nails into me and yelling like a banshee. Being half-asleep, I thought some prowler had gotten in and attacked me. Believe me, Branwen, you just did me out of ten years of my life. I think you scared Lance, too. He scooted under the bed."

We were both so shaken that we didn't try to go back to sleep. We would soon have to be on our way anyway. Propping up the pillows, we sat and talked.

"What were you dreaming about?" he wanted to know.

"Birds."

"Birds!"

I was recapturing the dream in my mind and I related it to him as the fragments came back to me.

"It's a damn good thing you woke up when you did," he said when I had finished. "I don't think I could have taken much more. I might have had to slug you—you were so strong. I wouldn't have believed you had strength like that."

"You probably thought it was Mr. Hyde after you."

"Now I think of it—that's what did it! You had the movie on your mind and also that lousy painting and you just put them together in a nightmare."

The door had swung open again. All I had to do now was walk in and tell him the whole thing. I lightly touched the marks on his neck.

"What if I'd really hurt you?" I said.

"Oh, I wouldn't have let you do that—you weren't that strong."

"But even for the little I did—I feel so guilty!"

"It wasn't your fault.You were asleep."

It wasn't my fault! He really believed that. I felt an easing of tension, as if he had just handed me a blank check. But did he really mean it? I had to know.

"Then you think that Dr. Jekyll wasn't responsible for Mr. Hyde's deeds?"

"That was different. Dr. Jekyll enjoyed crimes he didn't think he'd have to pay for."

"Yes, I suppose so, but what about people who have schizophrenia?"

"That's insanity."

"Then you agree that people who commit crimes during periods of insanity should not be punished as criminals."

"Not if they're really insane. But in general, I'd say that the plea of insanity is something that is highly abused by unscrupulous defense lawyers, particularly the plea of temporary insanity."

"Would the same apply to amnesia?"

"That would depend on how complete the amnesia is. Some people commit the crime first and then deliberately induce a mental block to forget what they've done."

The door was closing again.

"Man has always tried to attribute his evil acts to forces beyond his control," he went on. "Take werewolves, for instance. They were men who thought that in the guise of wolves they could commit any sort of atrocity and get away with it."

"I suppose you would say the same for demonic possession." *Not* demonic possession—that wasn't what I meant. Why did I have to bring that up? But what if, at the moment of death, Rhiannon's soul had willed itself into my body? Or her mind into my brain?

"Demonic possession?" he echoed. "That went out with the werewolves. Psychiatrists have other names for that sort of thing now." He touched a lighter to his cigarette.

"Does a thing change because you give it a different name?"

He looked at me curiously through a smoke ring. "Don't tell me you believe in an old superstition like that!"

"No, of course not," I said hastily. "Except when I read the headlines. Then I'm tempted to believe that the devil is making it better with people than God is. How about all those poor migrant workers buried in that peach orchard, and that fellow who sniped at people from the University of Texas tower, and —oh yes—the character who knocked off all those nurses. And those are only individual cases. What about war—and atrocities —and little people dying because generals and politicians have to have their war games?"

"I can't argue about those things," he conceded, "but I think humanity has to take responsibility for them, not—"

"There's so much that's not known," I rushed on before he could marshal his arguments. "Even reputable scientists are now granting the existence of things like ESP and clairvoyance and . . . what's that other thing?"

"Telepathy?"

"No, it's a longer name than that–psycho–psycho–kinesis!"

"What's that?"

"Being able to move material objects by psychic means. Poltergeists do it."

"You mean, like tipping tables and making vases and type-writers and things fly through the air?"

"Yes, that's it."

He gave me a long look. "Oh, come on now! What have you been reading?"

"The newspapers. Even the Russians are researching these fields."

"Look, what are you trying to get at, Branwen? You're talking in circles."

"Yes, I suppose I am. There's no compass for truth hunters. You walk–or talk–in circles, and you always come back to one undeniable fact: No one on this side of death ever knows the whole truth. Look at the church! For centuries its teachings were absolute. Even scientists had to conform or they'd be burned–like Bruno was. Only now it's the clergy who try to conform to science. You know what I think?"

He gave me an amused glance, yielding the floor with an exaggerated sweep of his hand. "No, Mrs. Swami, what do you think?"

"I think they're both wrong. No one knows the whole truth. We're like the blind men with the elephant."

"You lost me."

"Don't you know that old tale?"

"I don't think so. Myths are your department."

"Didn't you have that story in school?"

"I don't remember."

"Well, once there were six blind men–"

"Hey, it's getting late, Branwen," he interrupted, consulting his watch. "I want to hit the road early this morning. I'd better shave." He tamped out his cigarette and started to get up.

"No, wait!" I begged, tugging at his pajama coat. "I'll make it short. Besides, you're being rude."

He resigned himself into his pillow, knowing that when I had my mind made up I was hard to stop.

"As I said, six blind men went to see an elephant—"

"*See* an elephant?" he teased.

"Oh, you know what I mean! But each touched a different part of the animal, so that one decided that the elephant was like a wall, another, like a saber, still another, having grasped the trunk, swore it resembled a snake, the fourth, holding on to the ear declared it to be—a fan, I think it was, and—and—uh—"

"I get you. The leg would be a tree, and the tail—a rope, I guess. Now can I shave?"

"In a minute. Don't you see, Alan? We're the blind—we know only what we come in contact with, and therefore that is what we believe."

"Oh, I don't know," he objected. "I remember a poem in American Lit about believing in the ocean even if you've never seen it. I think Amy Lowell wrote it."

"Emily Dickinson," I corrected. "Oh sure, we believe in a lot of things because other people we know have seen them or because authorities or ministers say it is so. But what if five of the blind men managed to touch all the parts but the tail, while the sixth man, in addition to touching the rest, did come in contact with the tail, and, finding it to be the most meaningful member, tried to expound on it. What would the others have called him?"

"A bloody heretic. Now come on, let's get dressed. I'm getting hungry."

He was so handsome, standing there. *I love you, Alan,* I thought. *I'm trying to tell you something, but I just can't. You're my husband and I'm going to bear your child—if* it is *my child.*

"Don't look so serious, Branwen," he coaxed me. "So you had a nightmare! I should tell you about the time I dreamed that someone was going to clobber me with a big club and I woke up to find that I had just clouted my college roommate with the

dictionary. Poor fellow, he moved out right after that. Can't say I blame him. As for old Jekyll—Hyde was his creation so he deserved what he got. And I think you'll find that's true in most cases of split personality. A person creates his own formula for disaster."

How right you are, oh, my lovable, upright, serene, unimaginative husband! Damn you! You just slammed the door and turned the key!

9

I STOOD UNCERTAINLY outside the high-spired, ivy-embroidered church and watched as people went in and out of the heavy oaken doors, a nervous apprehension on many of their faces as they entered, and either a lightening of spirit or an intensified seriousness as they returned. Could I, a Protestant and stranger in the city, manage to slip into the line without attracting notice? I remembered hearing that Protestants might receive counsel, if not absolution, from priests.

Mercifully, the fan blade on our car had snapped and knifed through the radiator just as we were threading through Dubuque, so while Alan was having that fixed, I had a few hours to myself. Yes, mercifully, I say. Because if that fan hadn't snapped, I think something in me would have. As the speedometer had measured off the breadth of the state of Iowa that long day that began in Omaha, the tension and fears had mounted in me until they became almost unbearable. Whatever was wrong with me, there was no escape from it. As we rode along, I would become aware that I was clutching myself with arms folded across my chest, my nails digging into the flesh of

my upper arms, as if to hold myself intact and to ward off an invisible invader.

"Why do you keep turning around and looking back?" Alan wanted to know.

"Oh, just keeping a weather eye out for cops," I hedged. "You're not the world's slowest driver, you know." I had to control myself—resist this feeling of someone behind me—waiting, just waiting.

If Rhiannon still lived in me, what of the child? If she were to supersede me, what would she do to the baby? Would she love it? Or destroy it because it was mine? *If* it was mine!

No, it was too fantastic! Rhiannon was dead. She belonged to another dimension. The whole idea was laughable! So who was laughing?

The fan blade added another half-day and night to our trip. Alan checked us in at a motor inn, then set about finding a good garage. I took Lance for a walk in a park nearby. The late afternoon was uncomfortably warm, and I was both mentally and physically exhausted, so I sat down on a bench near a fountain where children were playing hide-and-seek. A small boy, about six or seven, squeezed in between a large bush and a trash receptacle, visible to me but invisible to a trio of children who came by on the path in front of me, hunting their quarry. I pulled Lance to me and started petting him so that he wouldn't give the child away by going to him and wagging his tail. The others peeked into the wrong bushes and moved on to another part of the park.

"Gee, thanks, lady," the boy said, still crouching in his hiding place. His great dark eyes looked up into mine—who was it he reminded me of? That square-set jaw, brown eyes, and Dutch boy bob of straight blond hair—my heart skipped a beat. If Timmy were alive now, this is how I envisioned he would look —even to the smudge of dirt on one cheek.

I smiled. "I'd be a no-good squealer if I gave you away," I told him quietly, making sure no other hunters were in the vi-

cinity. Lance strained at his leash, so I let him go to the boy, who ran his small, firm, fine-boned hand over the tawny fur. The dog responded by cleaning the dirty cheek.

"That's a nice dog," the boy said, wiping his hand over his wet cheek and creating new dirt streaks. "What's his name?"

"Lance."

"Hi, Lance!" he said, in the child-to-dog tone that is so personal. The golden plume waved vigorously.

"I wish I had a dog like this," the child said wistfully. "Do you live in Dubuque?"

"No, my husband and I are just here for the day."

"That's too bad. I thought maybe I could come and see him sometime."

"Yes, I wish you could. What's *your* name?" It couldn't be—

"Kevin."

It wasn't and that was just as well.

"Are you going to confession?"

The question startled me. It was so unexpected and yet so appropriate to my thoughts.

"Why do you ask that?" My God! He could be Timmy over and over—Alan's eyes and facial contours, my hair!

"Because that's where my mother is right now," he said, nodding his head toward the church across the street from the park. I could see people coming and going. "She told me to wait here. We live right down the block anyway."

"Gotcha, Kevin!" A little girl popped out from behind the bush and tapped him on the shoulder. "The other kids have gone home," she said. "You cover your eyes and I'll hide."

"No, Sally," he replied. "My mother'll be coming out in a minute and I promised I'd stay here. She's going to buy me shoes—and a baseball glove!"

Sally kicked at the ground, disappointed, but then she noticed a woman coming toward us, so she stuck out her tongue and dashed away.

"Come on, Kevin," the woman called.

"I'm coming!" he called. "Good-bye, Lance!" he said. "Shake hands!" The response was prompt. "Gee, lady, your dog's smart," he said.

"Thanks, Kevin. I wish I had time to show you some of his other tricks, but you'd better not keep your mother waiting."

"No, *ma'am!* S'long!" He gave Lance a final pat.

Kevin's question about my going to confession had been nothing more than a child's normal assumption that what was right for his parents was right for everyone else, but, coming from a little boy who could have been my Timmy, it was like an uncanny command from Providence. But for a Protestant? Well, why not? I would at last have told a human being—without having him see my face. I would go my way, and he his, and we would never have any way of recognizing each other, but he would *know*, another human being would *know*, and that might be expiation enough to rid me of Rhiannon.

After taking Lance back to the inn, I retraversed the park, stood hesitantly outside the church for a while, trying to get up nerve—the kind of nerve I would never have had for a conference with my own pastor—and finally slipped into the cool, other world of the church.

"Father," I said, when at last I was kneeling in the confessional, "I am not a Catholic. May I confess to you?"

"Are you sincere?" The voice, disembodied, seemed to be coming from another sphere. I suddenly knew why Catholics can so readily feel that the priest is their mediator. Divested of his physical being by the confessional booth, he is not only a mediator—he is God.

"I am sincere, Father."

"Are you a Christian?"

"Yes, I'm a Protestant."

"Then why don't you go to your own pastor?"

"I'm a stranger in this city. We're only passing through, and I need help now."

"Would you prefer to see me in my office?"

"No, Father, I prefer to talk to you here."

I could feel the blood rushing to my cheeks as I realized the meaning implicit in my answer. Lucky Catholics to have the anonymity of the confessional!

"I am weak, Father," I confessed. "I haven't the courage to face you any more than I have to face my own pastor. But I do have another reason—I feel that your counsel would be more objective and impersonal without any knowledge of my appearance. I want your opinion to stem from what I tell you, not from what you might think you see in me."

"You know, of course, that I cannot give you absolution."

"I understand that and I'm not asking that."

There was a pause, during which I could hear him stirring on his side of the booth.

"Tell me your trouble," he said at last.

I poured forth, in as concise a summary as possible, all my guilt, my anguish over Timmy's death, the events of the past year, the periods of amnesia, the strange things I'd done without knowing it—all, except my fear that Rhiannon—or some other sort of presence—was taking possession of me. I know I wasn't fair, but I feared he might think I was mad and refuse to hear me further. When I was done, I waited there in the gloom of the confessional, my tender Protestant knees in torment from the hard rail, my hands gripping the top part of the kneeler as though it were the horns of the altar. The priest was silent for a while and I remained suspended in a dark limbo, cut off from this world and the next.

"Years ago," the voice recommenced at last, cutting through the steamy atmosphere of the booth, "when you were still a child, you committed a heedless act which resulted in the death of your cousin. From what you tell me, it was not a willful act, nor would a child that age be held responsible. Out of fear, not only for yourself, but for the detrimental effect it would have on your parents, which last was not a selfish motive, you didn't tell the whole truth. In fact, on one point, you lied."

"Yes," I said.

"And because you did, that one fact dwarfed all the other circumstances surrounding your cousin's death, some of them mitigating circumstances. It was a truth you couldn't bear, so you shoved it into the back of your mind, but apparently it's been working in your subconscious until your mind is no longer able to cope with this guilt in a normal manner—hence the amnesia, if that is what it is. I'm not a psychiatrist and won't attempt to make a diagnosis of your mental condition."

He paused again as if he were considering his last words. "I tend to believe," he resumed slowly, "that you are magnifying your guilt—that you are punishing yourself unnecessarily. Beware of becoming a self-flagellant. Oh, I know those fellows were much in vogue during the Dark Ages, but nowadays we feel that little good is accomplished by self-torture. Certainly it would help neither you nor your loved ones. I don't imagine that flagellants are very pleasant people to have around. Nor would it do your unfortunate cousin's memory any good. May I ask if you have sought psychiatric help?"

"No, I haven't. I'm terrified that a psychiatrist might want to have me put away somewhere."

"I think a good psychiatrist would exhaust every other means before he'd do that."

"I hope he would, but how can I be sure? Besides, psychiatrists are expensive. My husband and his partner have been building a new civil engineering firm, and they have to keep their fees down to compete with older, larger, and more established firms."

"That's understandable."

I was annoyed. Wasn't the church good for anything anymore? "Father," I challenged him, "isn't Christ more powerful than any psychiatrist?"

"Well said—" he came right back at me— "but is *your* faith as strong as your utterance?"

"No," I had to admit, "but neither do I have faith in psychiatrists."

I heard a sigh and then the heavy sadness in his reply: "Then you must build faith in yourself and that will bring you closer to Christ. When Peter lost faith in himself, he could no longer walk upon the waters to reach his Lord. Man cannot live without faith and that begins with ourselves."

"But how can I regain faith?"

"Before we go into that, I must tell you that you are probably basically a good person, conscientious to a fault, or you wouldn't suffer so much remorse."

"To myself I just seem weak and cowardly."

"You must stop that sort of thinking. You know, there is a kind of egotism in wearing a hair shirt. If you're going to conquer this thing, you must learn to live with it. Let it be your incentive for good works. You can't bring Rhiannon back by constantly castigating yourself and mourning for her."

"But that's just it—I *don't* mourn for her, and the last thing in the world I'd want to do would be to bring her back. I have to be honest about that, Father. My only regret is that *I* had to be responsible for her death, and that I let my aunt and uncle bear the blame when a large share of it was mine. I hate myself for not having told the truth. If there were anyone living to whom I could confess—her parents or mine—"

"At this late date that would merely shift your burden onto their shoulders. It would be a negative action, and so would it be to tell your husband, because he wasn't involved. Would you want to transfer your terrible memory to him? Indeed, it takes character not to tell him."

He had been speaking with increasing sharpness, but now his voice became gentler. "You may have to eventually, however, if you can't cope with it yourself. Don't let your pride make you risk a mental breakdown."

"Then what can I do? What penance can I perform?"

"I cannot give you what one ordinarily thinks of as penance,

nor would I, even if you were a Catholic. A lot of people try to pay for their misdeeds by doing useless, unfruitful acts of penance, but, believe me, that hair shirt I mentioned never produced anything but raw skin. I prefer to suggest that you banish this guilt by performing positive acts dedicated to her memory, such as working among the poor—after the baby is born. Another thing is to love your husband and child all the more. But first and most important—and hardest of all—start to pray for Rhiannon's soul every day and ask that you may come to love her in your heart."

The walls of the booth were closing in on me.

"Pray for her, Father?" I hesitated, struggling to control myself, but I was unable to control the vindictiveness that burst from me. "Yes, I will pray for her—because she needed it! But to pray to love her—that would be dishonest. The last thing I'd want in this world would be to love Rhiannon. I loathed her, because I loathe cruelty—and she was cruelty incarnate, not only to me, but to harmless, helpless things that couldn't strike back."

"She must have had some good traits."

"Only for those she wanted to impress."

Again he was silent. I could hear him clearing his throat, and I wondered if he was considering throwing such a recalcitrant as me out, but he started again, with patient deliberateness. "No one—not even God—would want you to love the evil things she did. But Christ did tell us to love our enemies. Do it gradually. At first, just pray for the welfare of her soul, and eventually you may find it in your heart to love her. Then, when you have reached that stage, find some good works to do in her memory. And I think you will find yourself cleansed of your guilt, and, hopefully, the amnesia and strange experiences will go along with it."

It wasn't what I had expected. Priests weren't like this in books. What *had* I expected? Forty thousand paternosters? That hair shirt he talked about? His way was so much harder.

"You're disappointed?" he asked, reading my silence.

"It–is different," I admitted. "I'd thought–well, this is a new approach, isn't it?"

"Hardly. Three thousand years ago Isaiah counseled the people of Israel to pay for their misdeeds by hearing the orphan's plea and defending the widow. I'd call that positive action, not penance."

"It could be penance, too, depending on circumstances," I pointed out.

"Exactly," he agreed. "I wasn't trying to give you an easy out."

"But would it work?" I asked doubtfully.

"Unless there's some physical cause for your amnesia of which I am unaware, yes, I think it could."

"Thank you, Father–I will try to remember."

"Good! Now go in peace–and Christ go with you."

He gave me his blessing, and I stumbled out into the church sanctuary with stiffened, numbed legs. A number of people sat here and there in the pews, saying their rosaries or just meditating and praying. I slipped in among them and knelt again on my protesting knees, but I welcomed the pain–this much physical mortification I surely deserved. For a long time I stayed there, trying to mouth a silent prayer for Rhiannon, but the words wouldn't come. The votive lights flickered in their wine-red containers, beckoning to me–

"Do it gradually," the priest had said. All right then, one simple little act, I thought as I went forward, placed a coin in the alms box, and lighted one of the candles. The flame leaped upward in a tiny spear of prayer as I watched.

"This is for you, Rhiannon," I murmured, trying desperately to mean what I was saying. The flame, licking the air around it, burned blue at its base, a star at the tip of the wick, then burst forth into iridescent gold that leaped about a shadowy center. In its turn the gold tinged into red as it reached its zenith, and a wisp of gray smoke spiraled up from the tip of the tongue until at last it was swallowed by infinity. My eyes, following the smoke trail, carried with them a negative image of the flame, which

superimposed itself on a dark, brooding bird in a stained-glass window near the altar. For a second I thought it was the raven which left the ark, but as my eyes gradually lost the afterimage of the flame, I recognized the white dove of the Holy Spirit.

"For you, Rhiannon," I repeated, and this time I meant it. Suddenly the dove seemed to outglow the candle and there was light everywhere within me, expelling the shadows in my soul. The presence that had stalked me all those months was gone. I imagined—but it's too soon, I told myself—that a new and blessed presence had just quickened in my womb. When I left the church a few minutes later, I carried the memory with me, unperturbed by the shadowy core at the center of the flame.

10

RETURNING HOME WAS not the ordeal I'd dreaded. The experience in the church left me with a euphoria that wrapped itself around me like an invisible cloak, and the feeling of invincibility that had been with me in the mountains at least partially returned. I had confessed my guilt—left it behind in Dubuque—and the road ahead led to atonement. Besides, the child within me was innocent. God would safeguard it and, in doing so, would allow me to retain my sanity and identity.

It was a cool sunny day in midsummer when we turned into our driveway. The deep azure lake curled up in white caps at the shore. Roses clambered over the porch trellis, soft plumes of asparagus gone to seed waved in the crisp breeze, the raspberry bushes were rosy with fruit, and daisies and dandelions dotted the uncut grass. Alan groaned about the lawn, but I thought it made a lovely meadow, and Lance ecstatically bounded over the grass and weeds until he reached the woods, where he plunged into an orgy of sniffing out his old haunts. Soon we heard his high-pitched bay as he routed a rabbit from its burrow. I sighed, dreading the burrs I'd have to comb out of his tail.

Filling my arms with light bundles—Alan had forbidden me to lift my suitcases—I walked past a row of peony bushes, noting that all the blooms had fallen, leaving hundreds of four-part seed-pods to be decapitated. Alan opened the back door and held it wide. For a moment I hung back, feeling the old dread come over me. This was where it had all started. Even if things had happened in other places, it was here that the power had been released. It was here that it would be strongest. Then I remembered the priest's admonition.

"Rhiannon," I prayed silently, "wherever you are, may the Lord keep you and bless you." They were the words of a benediction I'd heard all my life, but they were all I could think of at the moment. Immediately the fear loosened its grip and I was able to take Alan's hand and step into the living room.

The sun was streaming through the window. Alan's chair stood in its proper place by the hearth, and a quick glance at the kitchen reassured me that the pink was still pink. Then a shadow winged its way across my mind. What was reassuring about that? *She* hadn't been there either.

Shaking off the brief chill, I moved from room to room, throwing open the windows, bringing in the fresh air, all the time deriding myself for my first silly qualms. This was home—it had our imprint on it just as its was on us. Whatever the future might bring, this was the place to stand and battle it out.

The first part of my pregnancy went by without incident and my spirit lifted. Alan found that much of the planning for the Kentucky project could be done in the office, so he was home every night. A number of novels to review had piled up while I was gone, and I was busy with those as well as my book of myths. Besides, there are all sorts of things to do when a baby is on the way. Alan and I made over the bedroom next to ours into a nursery—north-south walls blue and east-west pink—so we were ready for anything. During the day, while Alan was at business, I gave my paintbrush free rein, and soon Hobbits, Orcs, Ents,

elves, and dwarves and even a Gollum—all characters from the Tolkien books, as I envisioned them—were rampant on the walls.

After that we attacked the ballroom. I couldn't bear the thought of that moribund red on the walls anymore. We didn't try to complete it as a playroom—there would be plenty of time for that—but, after removing the old mirror and the fancy black molding, we sanded and spackled and laid on colors of aqua and yellow to drive the shadows from the room. I worked furiously, feeling that with every stroke of the brush I was sealing in and smothering the presence that had haunted me.

So summer came and went with the raspberries and sweet corn, and finally the orchard trees were bowed over the apples and plums and the vines in the arbor festooned with Concords and Niagaras. Between my books and writing and the yearly canning and freezing, I had little time for anxiety. As I worked, I would make a conscious effort to carry out the priest's advice—to pray for Rhiannon—and I thought it was helping me, for during this period she—or it—left me mostly alone. Oh, there were a few lacunae in my days, but they were so brief I could hardly claim them for anything else but momentary lapses of memory. As time went on, I began to be convinced that she—whatever it was, I always referred to it as "she"—was receding into the dark world from which she had come, and I looked to the future with joy as the insistent new life moved within me.

A chill fall drizzle beat a monotonous bolero on the windows the morning Alan left for Kentucky for the first time. Sunlight filtering through the thin overcast turned the lake into a pewter sheet that blended into the gray sky without demarcation. It hung like a vast theater curtain, cutting the land off at the edge of the bluff, and an ocean steamer moving slowly past seemed suspended over the jumping-off place from the world.

I swiveled my typewriter chair around and gloomily sipped a cup of coffee as I watched the steamer come into sight, sail along an imaginary horizon, and then disappear into the mist.

I thought I had steeled myself for this moment. My confession, my prayers for Rhiannon, and the life within me—these would bolster me when Alan was gone—but the dreariness of the day and the first stricken leaves of autumn drifting past my window, falling limp and sodden on the lawn, were weft and warp in my fabric of loneliness.

Oh, stop it! Alan hasn't been gone an hour and you're acting like an idiot again! Be thankful for a chance to catch up on your writing. What must my editor think? Now stop pitying yourself and get to work!

Putting aside the empty cup, I took up my half-finished manuscript and read it over, trying to pick up my train of thought where I had left off. Demeter and Persephone! What an innocent tale I'd made of it! The very thing to please any teen editor or parent. Demeter, the earth and corn-mother, mourning over her daughter, Persephone, goddess of vegetation, who has been carried off into the underworld by Hades, more commonly called Pluto, to be his queen. Demeter roams the world far and wide until at last she recovers her child, but only after the girl has tasted of the fatal pomegranate, given her by her grim husband. Thus, forever after, while spring and summer belong to her mother, Persephone must return to the netherworld for the other half of the year.

A pretty conceit for what had once more begun outside my window, and an innocent story on the face of it. But I was dissatisfied with what I'd written. I felt I hadn't played fair with my readers. Why not tell the story as it really was?

As I write now, I have before me my old manuscripts, the original and this, the version I wrote that day:

> How much horror lay in the ancient background, when primitive people, huddling around their fires in the feral darkness of winter, groped for the meaning of life and death, watching their days shrink with the weakening sun, their nights only fitfully illumined by a cold, pale moon. Danger

was in every shadow and it was then that the men listened to their women, who alone among them held the secret of new life, for who would then have dreamed that the pleasure of a few moments could swell a woman's belly and produce another human nine months later?

So it was that the women, who held this magic in their bodies, and who were the herb gatherers, became the rulers, healers, and soothsayers of their clans. They made a deity in their own image—a goddess—and they were her priestesses. And as a woman is first young, then mature, then old, and the moon, which is her symbol, is new, full and old, so did the goddess have three phases. Persephone and Demeter weren't separate—they, and toothless Hecate, were aspects of the threefold goddess, and they were known by many names—Persephone: Proserpina, Kore, Hebe, Diana, Artemis, Athene, Demeter, Ceres, Hera, Juno, Ishtar, Isis, Aphrodite, Venus; and Hecate: Ereshkigal, Maia, and Cardea, to mention only a few.

It was the goddess who could recall spring and summer, and her priestesses who named the price. Most of them, no doubt, were motivated by the desire to help their people, but fear ruled supreme. Life was a thin thread easily broken, and only the most terrible sacrifices could persuade the deity to give birth to the sun again. In mimetic ritual, a sacred king was chosen to be the goddess' lover-husband, to impregnate her, to be tortured, to die, and to be torn in pieces by her priestesses—Maenads frenzied with laurel or hallucinatory mushrooms. Still, if a king were pleasing to the goddess, she might let him live on for another term, or as long as it suited her, using child substitutes—her own perhaps—for the sacrifice. And because she was triune, the goddess was fickle to man and always in conflict with herself.

As I reread this now, I wonder how I ever thought I could get it by my editor. Perhaps I didn't care—I was just giving vent

to my own gloomy thoughts, trying to find some of my own answers as I wrote:

> If I could re-create the awesome beginning of man, the gyres of birth and death and rebirth that unite us all and erase the gap of generations—and, in the inadequacy of words, attempt to show the oneness of us all in the grip of fear or joy or hate or love, to kill or be killed, or merely to survive, only to die! The wheel of fortune scoops us up and sends us spinning over the edge into the abyss—to oblivion? Or perchance to catch us up again to take another whirl —again and again—not in a circle, but up the ascending coil of Time.
>
> For still we ask: What is God? Who is God? From whence do we come? Whither are we bound? The eternal questions we could not answer then and cannot now—not in the sophistication of our test tubes nor the trepidity of primitive man who danced to the tune of a mare-headed Demeter, whose hair streamed silver behind her as she leaped over hedges and into lakes—

I *did* get pretentious, didn't I? No teen-age material this! My trend of thought is all too apparent now. I wasn't thinking of Demeter, I was seeing a fey-eyed Rhiannon—and this was just what the priest had told me I mustn't do. I remember ripping the sheets out of my typewriter and beginning again—I'm surprised I even kept them. I suppose I thought some of those ideas, if cut and simplified, might enliven my script. I tried to shut Rhiannon out of my mind and to conjure up a raven-haired, Grecian Demeter, but my plodding typewriter lagged behind my thoughts. I wrote, then tore out the paper again and rewrote, my fingers accelerating in a burst of speed—until I stopped short. Instead of the name Demeter I'd written Rhiannon. Furiously I x'd it out, but now, when I tried to return to my story, my hands faltered as my thoughts dwindled into inanities, and I

found myself listening to the drip, drip of water on the windowpane, the drone of the refrigerator in the kitchen, the groans in the walls, and the throbbing of arcane fears which had come flooding back over me.

Then the child within me gave me a kick and I was filled with warmth and purpose. Nothing, not the Furies themselves, was going to harm this new life as long as I had the strength or breath within me.

"Rhiannon!" I tried to frame a prayer for her, but immediately knew it for the meaningless repetition that it was. Better no prayer than an insincere one. Back to work. But I was mentally tongue-tied. I rose and went to my Thesaurus for help. As I removed it from the shelf, I saw another book lodged behind it, perhaps fallen from the shelf above. I extracted it and was about to find another niche when I noticed the title: *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About—!*

Then there was no way out. It lay in my hand like a guilty secret. What was I to do with it? I had finally paid for it, to stop the notices coming. It was mine. I could do whatever I wanted to—even burn it. I went into the living room and touched a match to logs that had lain there since spring and were tinder dry. When the flames had mounted high enough I threw the book in—Demeter presiding over a living sacrifice.

Then it came again, that metallic laughter, bronze on bronze, as though this time it was issuing from the pages as they curled and blackened.

"Bran—wen! Did you think I'd gone? Did you think you'd killed me with those silly prayers of yours? How I laughed at you! Humbling yourself for my sake—how touching!"

A bit of black ash caught a current of air and whisked up the chimney.

"Just like that you'll go someday," it continued, emanating from the fire, the speaking tubes, from the walls—it was everywhere.

"You thought I was dead, but I'm not. I went through the gate

and out again and you can never be rid of me—you know that, don't you?"

I faced around the room, trying to locate her.

"Who are you?" I cried. "Come out where I can see you!"

"Look at yourself! You'll find me."

"R-Rhiannon?"

"Rhiannon—Rhi-an-non—" it mocked, then died away, but the atmosphere was charged. A sibilant, asthmatic breathing that wasn't mine issued from my chest. I struggled to breathe on my own, but my body was being wrenched away from me.

Now it came again, stronger and more assured: "Always trying to hide things, aren't you, Branwen? That conscience of yours! How I've enjoyed seeing you squirm!"

I felt weighted to the floor. Groping for the rosewood pillar that ornamented the open archway leading into the hall, I clung to it desperately, as though it were the only bit of reality in the room.

"No, I won't let you!" I was sobbing. "There's my baby. For that I'll fight you to the death and beyond."

"But you don't have to have the baby, do you?" it insinuated. "Are you quite sure it isn't deformed or damaged? That I haven't *done* something to it? Poor Alan, he'd be so unhappy. Why risk it?"

I dug my fingernails into the post. "If I kill myself, Rhiannon," I reminded her, "you'll die, too."

I heard a sharp intake of breath, and then a childish voice: "No, don't do that, Branwen, don't!"

"Yes, do, yes do!" it contradicted itself.

I had known all along I wouldn't do it, not as long as I was carrying the child. I had been responsible for one death. I wouldn't be for another, no matter what she did! Outside, the rain had stopped and a dense fog tried the windows with astral fingers, narrowing my world down to the confines of the house. The walls were closing in on me. I had to break through, tear away the mists, and recover a world of substance and normality.

With a cry I rushed out the side door. I think I remember Lance trying to follow me, but the door slammed before he could get out and I was too frenzied to stop.

Outside, everything was still, as though the fog had stopped up all the mouths of nature. It wrapped its dank arms around me, but I forced my way through it. Somewhere in the abyss a foghorn was calling. Others were out there, lost and crying for human contact. If I could just get to them—

I brushed through the dripping woods, heading toward my high place on the bluff, through vapors teeming with things walking and stalking. The child inside me gave a rebellious lurch, but I stumbled on. . . .

Finally I was standing there on the brink of nothing, listening to the horn wailing, only now I knew I couldn't reach it, because it was real and subject to the laws of space and distance.

The force of her gripped my limbs again.

"Thought you could leave me behind, didn't you, Branwen?" The words echoed off the trees around me, and her tone became soft and enticing. "Now what are you going to do? You've come to the edge of nothing—you know that. Just one little step farther—"

"No, Branwen, don't, don't! You'll kill us!" It was the childlike voice again.

The other overrode it harshly.

"Listen, Branwen! I killed your first baby! With *your* hands I picked up his pillow and smothered him. Now what do you think I will do to this one?"

I reeled with the impact, leaning over the void and then pulling myself in again and staggering back on the rock.

"You didn't! You couldn't!" I cried. "You're lying—you have to be lying! You're not that strong. You can't take over because I won't let you, so now you want to pull me into the abyss with you. I don't believe you—I don't, I don't!"

"Oh, but I did, I did!" she mocked me. Then she lowered her voice, almost chanting. "With your hands I killed him. He was

no son of mine. He was yours—given you by Alan. Like the kitten my father gave you—just another pet to play with. Look at your hands—they caressed and fondled him and held his head to nurse your breast—such loving mother's hands! Flex them—so tender, so deadly!"

She droned on, her will driving me toward the edge again. I wound my arms around the beech, terrified that the weight of the child would pull me over.

"I won't do it! I won't! I won't!" I screamed, looking down the cliff face into the fog. "I don't want to die!"

"Don't do it! Don't! Don't! I don't want to die!" came the high-pitched echo.

But other words cut through the mists like a thin-edged knife.

"Then live—live for your brat's sake! Live for the moment when a little black baby lies at your breast. The painter, remember? The jungle king with white feathers on his head, astride a living, squirming, human throne—" She broke off with a malicious laugh.

"That—that's preposterous! I had no desire for him!"

"No, but *I* did!" she hissed. "Too bad you had to miss the fun."

The horn bellowed in the distance. I felt her dragging me toward the rim again.

"Don't do it, Branwen! Come back!" Someone else was tugging at the back of my mind. "Don't kill us! I don't want to die!"

But the thing pushing me forward was stronger. My hands slid off the slippery bark, and inch by inch I was moving farther out on the crag. Somewhere in the nothing beneath me waves were shattering on the jagged rocks, but I neither saw nor heard them for the gray-yellow wool that blanketed them. It was so soft and I could just lie down and drift wearily away—

Drained of all will, either to live or to die, I swayed back and forth as the two forces contended over me, until at last they threw me out of balance and I slid down on the slimy surface of the rock, which sloped toward the lake at its outer edge. My feet thrust forward into space. Now I was fighting, grappling for

life as I felt myself being dragged outward by the sheer force of gravity. The child was being forced into my spine by the scraping of my swollen belly over the rough surface. I swung my legs wildly in under the rock, searching for anything that might break my fall—and found it! My right foot caught in the crotch of a gnarled limb reaching around from the side of the rock, checking my slide. Another branch projected just above me. I clutched it and, praying that Jack-and-the-beanstalk would hold, managed to roll to one side and gradually haul myself to safety.

Jeering laughter rent the air.

"I knew you wouldn't! Coward! That's why I dared bring you out here. I don't *want* you dead yet! I only wanted you to crawl and squirm and beg for mercy. I wanted to show you that I can control you and there's nothing you can do about it. . . ."

Footsteps in the fog and a warm tongue licking my face, then strong arms lifting me up and wrapping a coat around me. I felt the bruise of the slide rule in his shirt pocket against my cheek as he held me to him, and Lance's rough paws raking my dangling legs.

"Branwen! What on earth . . . ?" Alan was exclaiming.

That was all I heard.

Paisley tendrils of seaweed, waving to and fro in an endless tunnel, brushed at me, wound their coils around my neck and limbs, and entwined themselves in my hair as I swam and struggled in the swirling pale green waters. Divergent tides alternately pulled me down and shot me along until at last I could see a narrow opening beyond. If I could just make it through I would be all right, but someone was swimming alongside me, trying for the hole, too, and there wasn't room for both of us to slip through. I redoubled my strokes, but so did the other swimmer and now I was caught in the prehensile weed. Bubbles issued from my nose and mouth and rose to the surface as I sank downward. A mask-like thing pressed down over my nose and mouth and at first I struggled against it, until I realized that this was not a hostile

thing but was miraculously drawing me toward the light. My head broke water and I heard a babble of voices . . .

"She's coming to," someone said.

"Has the ambulance come yet?" asked another.

"It's just pulling in the drive."

"We got hold of your doctor, Mr. Ericsson. He'll meet you at the hospital."

"Thank you, fellows. I can't tell you how I appreciate this."

Alan. But he was in Kentucky.

"Lucky thing the airport was weathered in and I decided to come home rather than taking the train!"

It *was* Alan!

I opened my eyes. Ranged around in a circle above me were the serious, concerned faces of members of our local rescue squad. Jerry, who serviced our car, still in his grease-stained monkey suit, was holding the oxygen mask to my nose and mouth. Faces floated into my vision—Marvin, who sold us eggs—Joe, Alan's barber—Leroy, our plumber—Mrs. Lemke's son Harold—and others I didn't recognize—doctors in overalls. A young police officer was taking notes from Alan. Then I noticed Marian Dahlmann's husband standing by the fireplace, and my brain began to clear. I imagined I could read curiosity and pity in his gaze. Did he know about the book? I hoped there was nothing recognizable left of it in the fireplace. Then I remembered—

"My baby!" I murmured, reaching. The mound was still there and something moved inside.

Jerry removed the mask. "So far so good, Mrs. Ericsson," he said.

Alan leaned down and took my hand, all the while talking to the officer, who was jotting down notes.

"I found her outside by the back step. She must have been running out to the garage to greet me and tripped over something—"

Why was Alan lying? I started to speak, but he pressed my hand hard several times in silent code.

"Was that how it was, Mrs. Ericsson?" the officer asked.

Alan thought I'd tried to commit suicide! That's why he was protecting me. And the others would think the same thing. Virgil Dahlmann would tell his wife I'd tried to jump off the cliff and everyone would gossip—

"Was that how it was, Mrs. Ericsson?" the officer asked again.

"Yes—yes," I lied. "I was so surprised to hear him return. I—ran out to see what had happened and lost my balance and fell—and that's all I remember."

11

Dr. Ambrose—no, I forget, I'm not ready to talk about him yet. Sometimes I get ahead of myself. I'm so afraid I won't get it all told. There have been so many obstacles deliberately put in my way and setbacks, too—sometimes whole sections of my work missing that I have to redo—so it's hard not to get the sequence jumbled.

It wasn't through any decision of my own that I at last sought psychiatric help. It was Alan who insisted. We talked it over in my hospital room after my doctors assured us that I wouldn't lose the baby—not if I was careful.

"I think you should see a psychiatrist, Branwen," he said quietly the night before I returned home.

"I know what's in your mind, Alan." I faced him. "I admit it was crazy being out there and I can't blame you for thinking—what you are thinking. You'll just have to believe me. I wasn't trying to commit suicide."

That was truthful enough. All I'd been doing was trying not to.

"Then why were you out on the bluff?" he demanded.

I shook my head. How could I tell him and make him understand?

"I don't know. All I remember is that I thought I heard voices [that was no lie]—it sounded as if someone were crying for help out in the fog, so I went out to see what was the matter [and that was], but when I got there I couldn't hear them anymore."

Why didn't I just tell him everything? But then a vision arose of him trying to work it all out on his slide rule and I knew it was useless. How could I possibly make him understand about Rhiannon? That she was now part of me? He'd think me mad, and then what else could he do but have me put away? I couldn't allow it. My baby was not going to be born in an asylum!

He leaned forward with his arms on his thighs, his fingers interlaced, and his thumbs revolving around each other nervously, his eyes averted. I knew he was pondering whether or not to pursue the subject.

"By the way, thanks for covering up for me to the police," I said. "It would have looked bad if they'd known I was out on the bluff. I should have thanked you before."

"What else could I have done? People talk," he answered simply, as he pulled a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket.

"Look what I found this morning rolled up in a pair of socks. Do you have any explanation for this?"

One quick glance at the signature and I deliberately knocked over my water glass as I reached for my reading glasses with trembling hands.

> My Darling,
>
> Its been so long since we were together. Remember the night when I was wearing the black neglijay? And we bathed in the moonlight on the balcony? Then I ran from you, but you caught my neglijay and pulled it from me as I fled laughing through the house, until finally you cornered me and carried me back to the bed.
>
> I know I can make you happyer than she can if you just give me the chance. I suppose I should be angry with you, but I forgive you as you just hav'nt seen the

diference between us. Don't let her push me out, please, doll. I can give you so much more. I love you. I want to live, too.

XXXOOO

RHIANNON

By the time he had finished picking up the pieces of glass I had myself under control. I was ready for him before he could continue.

"Why are you showing me this?" I inquired coldly. "Seems to me *you* have something to explain. So Rhiannon *was* someone else all along. Trying to tell me I'd used the name!"

It didn't work. Alan simply ignored me.

"Branwen, I don't know what you're trying to do. If this note was your idea of a joke, I am not amused. If not, if you don't remember writing it, then I'm worried. About you, about us, and about our child."

"Does this look like something I'd write? See how she spelled 'negligee.' . . ." I bridled.

"No, it's not at all like you," he conceded, "and that's what has me concerned. You never call me 'doll.' No, wait a minute—yes, you did! The night she refers to in this note—you called me 'doll' then. Or don't you remember?"

I made no answer this time—just glared at him.

"You've got to believe me, Branwen," he persisted, "I've never lied to you. I love you, but if there's no mutual trust we won't be able to work this out. I have to tell you that there've been times when—well—when you didn't seem yourself. Funny, now I think of it, whenever I've referred back to something that was said or that happened during one of those times, you've always pulled a blank. I guess I was too much absorbed in my work to pay much attention and I blame myself for that now. But I've been thinking things over and I've come to some decisions. First of all, I've persuaded Jim to do the fieldwork on the Kentucky

job and I'll manage the office end. That way I'll be in town until after the baby's born."

I knew how much that was costing Alan. To let his partner do the fieldwork he loved so much while he'd be stuck over a drafting board here! Alan had never desired another woman, of that I was certain. But his work is his mistress and I long ago resigned myself to that division of affection. He is not a theoretician. He wants to be on the scene, within touch of steel and concrete, watching his creations go up inch by calculated inch.

"Alan, I can't do that to you," I demurred. "I know how much the fieldwork means to you."

He responded instantly to my change in tone, and his big, rough hand closed over mine knotted in the sheet.

"You can and you will," he insisted. "You see, I've already made the arrangements. But I do have something to ask of you in return, and that is to see a psychiatrist."

I turned my face away to hide the tears rolling down my cheeks, but he saw.

"Now, darling"—he tried to soothe me—"I don't think you're psycho or anything like that, but I do feel there's something wrong—maybe the shock of Timmy's death built up over the years until it brought on a form of amnesia. And what's more, I know that you are just as aware of it as I am—more so—which is proof enough that you're—you're not—"

"That I'm not insane? That's what you're trying to say, but you don't really mean it, do you?"

"Of course you're not insane—I don't think that for a minute!" He protested a little too vehemently. "But I have seen the strained look on your face in the last year that was never there before. And there've been little things that didn't seem very important at the time, yet added up they are serious. For instance, there was the night I returned home unexpectedly and you greeted me almost in a panic. Remember? You had the lights on all over the house. You said it was ESP that tipped you off that

I was coming. I thought you were kidding and I made that crack about AT and T. Then you did try to pass it off as a joke, but I realize now that you actually *had* no memory of my phone call. Something happened that night, didn't it? You were just about over the edge that time, weren't you? Still, I might have missed it if I hadn't found out about the kitchen having been repainted."

I withdrew my hand. "You've really been keeping book on me, haven't you? How did you know about the kitchen?"

"When I went to buy paint for the nursery and ballroom, Romy Wolff asked me if I liked the orange kitchen better than the pink one we had first. I couldn't understand what he was talking about until this week when I borrowed your checkbook to pay the bills and I happened to see your stub for the check you gave the contractor. Then there's something else—"

I waited, not daring to speak.

"Does the Beaux Arts Gallery in Omaha use purple wrapping paper?"

"H-how do I know? What makes you ask?" My words were barely audible.

"Because of a certain item in the amount of thirty-two dollars and fifty cents that came in on this month's Master Charge. The gallery was apparently slow in turning in its slips."

"I—I don't know what to say. I have no memory of buying that painting, Alan, or of even being in the gallery. They say pregnant women do strange things at times."

"Yes, that's what I keep thinking," he agreed. "Now I know what you were driving at in some of those strange conversations we had on the way home—you know, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and the responsibility of a person during amnesia—and a lot of other things I haven't been able to tie in yet, but I won't go into those now. I thought things were better out in Colorado—that you were really getting over whatever was bugging you. That was one reason I suggested the trip for you. And then came Omaha. By the way, what happened in Dubuque?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"There was such a change in your mood after that. You'd been so quiet during the first part of the trip, except to ask questions no one can answer. Then suddenly you were gay as a debutante. You chatted nonstop all the way across Wisconsin."

All the way—except for the brief moments when we passed near the old farm. I'd fallen silent then, trying to block out guilty memories by thinking of the lovers who lay in the cave sealed by my uncle.

"Branwen, are you listening?" Alan persisted.

"I—I went into a church in Dubuque—and I prayed—and I thought I had my answer, but it's all gone wrong again, I don't know how—"

It was at least a partial truth. I could look him in the eyes as I said it.

"Whatever it was, I wish you could find it again. You were like your old self all summer. I was sure it was all over, and I wasn't going to say anything, even when Wolff told me about the paint. I told myself there was no need to worry. . . . And then, to be gone just a few hours and come home to find you—"

He broke off and I thought I heard him choke back a sob. I reached out and stroked his cheek, loving him more then than in any moment of passion we'd known together. As he pressed my hand to his lips an invisible current flowed between us that transcended the sensual. In that instant I wanted to brush away all the barriers of half-truths and lies behind which I'd been hiding, and I almost did, but he spoke first.

"I know there must be something deeply wrong for you to deceive me like this, because it's not like you, Branwen. So give me credit for having more trust in you than you have in me."

I lowered my head and picked at an imaginary spot on the bedspread in an effort to hide the color I could feel flaming in my cheeks. I knew the moment was lost—that he had inadvertently turned my stupid pride in on me again.

"You're right, Alan. There have been—occurrences" was all I

could bring myself to admit. "I wish I could tell you about them, except that I don't know the explanation any more than you do."

At least not one he'd accept.

"Please try to believe me," I pleaded. "You're wise not to go to Kentucky, even though I know how much it will cost you, and I thank you for that. I'm always much better when you're home—and yes, I will go to a psychiatrist. All I ask is, don't send me to some kook. You know what I mean—someone who'll tell me that I hated my mother and desired my father—or some such nonsense."

"What's this about hating your mother?" Dr. Gordon, my obstetrician, who walked into the room just then, wanted to know.

"Oh, I was just lighting into Freud," I parried. "Alan wants me to see a psychiatrist."

"Yes, I know," he said, sitting down at the foot of the bed and tapping his knee with his stethoscope. "And I have just the man for you. He's not one to follow all the trite theories—in fact, he's rather a rebel among his colleagues, but he gets results and that's what counts. He's an oddball, but one I think you'd like, Branwen. He's witty—hasn't much time for Freud and Reich and that gang. Makes up his own procedures and for some strange reason they work, possibly because he goes by the theory that there's been too much generalization in psychiatry. People are individuals and do not necessarily react the same way in the same given circumstances. He says his psychotherapy is 'custom-tailored.'"

"Perhaps I could trust someone like that," I said.

"There's another reason why I think you'd like him. He's a thoroughgoing intellectual. I don't mean an intellectual snob, but he just naturally has all kinds of varied knowledge stored in his head, as if he'd been born with it—right down your alley, Branwen—you'll see. I've already made an appointment for you next week. Dr. Ambrose is his name."

12

ALAN DROVE ME downtown for my first appointment, deposited me at the front door of the building where Dr. Ambrose and his partner, Dr. Blehys, had their offices, then tactfully went about some business of his own for the next hour or so, although I was fully aware that he and the doctor had conferred previously. As I walked toward the entrance of the building, a dead starling fell at my feet, its neck broken from crashing into the tall glass cylinder looming above me. Looking toward the gutter I saw several other dead birds lying there and I shuddered. How beautiful the building had been in the jagged skyline as we were approaching it on the high, curving freeway—a giant keep that seemed to be slowly revolving as it shimmered in the warm Indian summer sun! The Glass Tower, I called it, although that wasn't its real name, but now I knew it for what it was—a great, vitreous reef offering no nesting places, only death to winged things. For a moment I almost turned away from the entrance, as if this had been a bad omen, but I chided myself for being silly, and in a few moments I was seated in the psychiatrist's office, looking out at the breathtaking panorama of the harbor through pale aqua netting.

"Excuse me for not opening the curtains," Dr. Ambrose apologized as he followed my glance, "but I keep them that way to prevent birds from crashing into the glass."

I relaxed. I could like this man.

In spite of this first impression, my early sessions with Dr. Ambrose were sparring matches rather than consultations, but that was mostly my fault. It's natural to fear any man who purports to see into your mind—who, just by listening to you, can classify and catalogue you, and who holds the power, if he sees fit, to shut you away from the world. At first I guardedly watched for some reason not to trust him, but gradually my reservations began to break down. Everything about him belied my expectations. I confess to thinking in stereotypes. Never having known a psychiatrist before, I'd imagined them to be the sum total of their patients' neuroses and psychoses, influenced, no doubt, by my memory of my college psychology professor, a fidgety, wiry little man with a disconcerting tic in one eye. According to campus rumor, he'd driven one wife to suicide and a second to divorce by keeping them under constant analysis.

Dr. Ambrose was none of these. He moved in slow motion with nerveless ease, yet everything he did was controlled and purposeful. He was like a falcon poised in the air, scanning the ground for prey, and only his black eyes peering out from under his shaggy white brows contradicted the effect of total lassitude. They quickened with interest or became withdrawn and veiled according to the mood of the moment, but always, if one cared to look, one could detect an inner glow.

As time went on, his droll humor, his abundant, but unassuming wisdom, and a sort of shining kindness about him were gradually eroding my resistance. I suppose he was becoming a father image to me, if my own limited, unprofessional powers of analysis could be considered valid. There were times when I had the impulse to lay my head on his shoulder and sob the whole thing out.

Careful now, Branwen, I would warn myself, *you'll give yourself away before you know it.*

Sometimes, however, Dr. Ambrose didn't talk about my problem at all. As Dr. Gordon said, he had a vast store of knowledge that was always spilling over, and often he would go off on tangents that were only vaguely related to me, or so it would seem. I remained alert in any case, for fear he might catch me off guard.

Alan had told him that on occasion I had assumed the name Rhiannon and had even signed that name to a note to him. Dr. Ambrose asked me about this several times, but I always changed the subject or in some other way avoided answering him.

And then came that special afternoon. The minute I entered his office I sensed a change in his approach, an intensification of purpose. Yet there was nothing external to indicate this, outside of an unwonted silence on his part. He didn't speak, merely nodded to me as I took my seat. He refilled his pipe and lit it with all the ceremony of an altar boy lighting candles, then leaned back, puffing it slowly, as if he had all the time in eternity to enjoy it, and eyed me thoughtfully.

I sat across from him, uncertain, a little hostile, wondering what category he was putting me into.

"'Branwen,'" he said at last, and I thought at first he was addressing me, but he wasn't. He was mouthing the name, savoring it. "'Branwen,'" he repeated, "and 'Rhiannon'—beautiful old Welsh names. But then, you did say your background was Welsh, didn't you?"

"Yes. My mother's parents came from Wales."

"I don't know if I mentioned it before to you—I was born there. In fact, I had my early schooling there."

I was immediately interested. "Of course! I thought there was something familiar about your accent, but I couldn't place it. Now I realize that at times you have a speech pattern similar to my grandmother's, but she died so long ago I had almost forgotten."

He seemed pleased. "I left Wales to go to medical school and

I've been many places in the world since, so I'm surprised you noticed it at all."

"Do you have family left in Wales?" I asked innocently.

A shadow darkened his face. "My mother was dead by the time I left. She came from a very proud and wealthy family, not that any of their wealth was passed on to me—just enough to get me through college. I never knew who my father was." Then he smiled disarmingly. "You see, everyone has hidden things they don't like to talk about."

"But you're talking about it."

"For the first time since I left home. I thought it might put you at ease."

And just a trick to get me to open up, I suspected.

"Well, that's enough of that." He brushed it aside as he would an annoying cobweb. "But it is pleasant to hear some of the old names again. Seems to me that Branwen and Rhiannon figured in Welsh folklore. It's been so long I've forgotten the tales."

"You never would have if you'd heard my grandmother tell them," I said enthusiastically, feeling myself on sure ground now, although I couldn't see what it had to do with my case.

"My grandmother never talked to me. Always called me 'that devil's son.'" He said it as a simple fact, without bitterness, but I could have bitten my tongue anyway.

"My mother told me some stories," he continued, "but she wasn't well and she was not a natural storyteller. I do remember that Branwen was the sister of Bran, king of Wales, and he married her off to the king of Brittany—or was it Ireland?"

"Ireland, I believe," I said.

"You see, you do know it better than I do. Go on, tell me!"

"Well, let's see—oh yes, Branwen had another brother. His name was—uh—Evnissyen. He was the troublemaker. After the marriage feast he mutilated the Irish king's horses, which caused a dreadful brawl, but Bran made restitution. Then the Irish king, Matholwch, took his bride and his court back to Ireland, where Branwen bore a son. At first she and Matholwch were

happy, but the Irish were still resentful about the horses, so they finally drove Branwen from the king's chamber and made her cook for the court, and the butcher had to give her a box on the ear every day. After suffering this for a year or so, Branwen tied a letter to the wing of a starling she had trained and told it where to find her brother in Wales, which at that time took in all of what is now England. It flew straight to Bran, who invaded Ireland as soon as he could round up all his fighting men. His army sailed in ships, but Bran was so huge he just waded."

"I like that part," he interrupted.

"A bit of Welsh bragging, I suspect." I laughed.

"Oh, I don't know," he rallied. "Welshmen can do lots of things other people can't. Merlin transported all of Stonehenge from Ireland to England."

"But he couldn't save himself from Niniane," I countered.

"Oh well, weakness for the fair sex has always been a racial characteristic among the Welsh. But I interrupted you. Go on with your story."

"Let's see—where was I? Oh yes—the Irish, being very much afraid, tried to outwit them by treachery, but they were found out, and there was a terrible fight and almost everyone was killed on both sides. Branwen's baby boy was thrown into a fire and burned to death. Bran was shot with a poisoned arrow and was dying, so he made the seven Welshmen who escaped cut off his head and take that and his sister Branwen back to Wales. She, however, died of grief because two islands had been destroyed on her account. Bran's head was buried in the White Mount in London, where it protected England from its enemies until Arthur came along and dug it up because he felt it was a shame not to be able to protect England by his own valor."

"That was pompous of him. Look what it got him in the end. I'll bet Merlin never advised him to do that. Now what about Rhiannon?"

I hesitated. Why was he suddenly so interested in the background of the names? Particularly Rhiannon? For all he knew

that was merely a name I'd pulled out of a hat one night. He had no way of knowing about my cousin. Did he think my choice of that name had some special significance that could be explained by the tale behind it? But what?

"I'm afraid I'm taking up an awful lot of time," I demurred. "You must have patients waiting—"

"There's time," he insisted. "You don't know how long it is since I heard the old tales."

"All right, if you say so," I consented. "Rhiannon was another Welsh queen. She first married Pwyll, son of Dyved, who met her out riding. She could travel so swiftly when she was only walking her horse that Pwyll couldn't catch up when he was galloping his. After many adventures they were married and she bore a son—Pryderi, his name was. He was one of the seven Welshmen who later escaped Ireland with Branwen, by the way. A few nights after his birth, as Rhiannon lay sleeping, someone stole the boy, and her maids, fearful that they would be accused, smeared her mouth and hands with puppy blood and swore that she had killed her child. Pwyll refused to have her executed but sentenced her to sit by the front gate and carry any visitors into the palace on her back. The boy was recovered some years later by a nobleman and brought to the palace, and Rhiannon once more was honored as queen."

"And after Pwyll died, Pryderi, whose name means 'Anxiety,' married his mother to Manawyddan, still another brother of Branwen, who was also one of the seven Welshmen. Thus Branwen and Rhiannon were sisters-in-law," Dr. Ambrose continued my story.

I was betrayed! "Doctor, you knew those stories all along! You were making fun of me," I reproached him.

He laughed. "No—not at all. I wanted to find out what you knew and associated with those names, particularly that of Rhiannon, since that's a name you apparently chose for yourself during a state of amnesia. And, to be truthful, I was always more interested in the historical and anthropological background of the

later Brythonic folk and fairy tales, so much so that in many cases I've forgotten the details." His long, browned hand lay on a pile of papers on his desk, unconsciously dog-earing the top ones.

"Branwen and Rhiannon were goddesses, you know," he said softly.

"I'd forgotten that, but that's right! Branwen's father was Llŷr, the sea god, wasn't he?"

"Yes, and Manawyddan was a sea deity, too. So both Branwen and Rhiannon were always associated with water, although that's left out of the later stories, where they were only human beings. Originally, however, they were goddesses—possibly one and the same goddess in her different aspects: Maid, Woman, Crone—her colors: white, red, and black."

"Like Persephone, Demeter, and Hecate," I exclaimed. "I was just writing about them."

"Exactly. The same female trinity. Three is a magical number in any religion. The Great Goddess of the Celts was Rigantona, of which name 'Rhiannon' is a contraction. As the Maid, she was benevolent and represented birth, hope, and budding, untarnished life. As the Woman, she was lustful and fickle—life in all its varying vicissitudes. But her third face was Death, malevolent and terrible. The crow, which devours carrion, was her emblem, and in that function she was not entirely evil, for, called the Morrigan by the Irish, she and her cohorts gathered up the dead on the battlefield and carried them to the Celtic heaven. The tradition of Rigantona continued down the ages into the Arthurian cycle, where she emerged as Morgan le Fay, the sorceress and half-sister of Arthur and his deadliest enemy. As Margawse, she incestuously bore Arthur's bastard, Mordred, thus sealing his doom. She was one of the three queens who took his body from the battleground and bore him to the Isle of Avalon. Morgan was the death aspect of the Lady of the Lake."

This was fascinating, but I failed to see where it was getting

us. He must have seen the question in my face, for he asked, "Something bothers you?"

"I was just wondering what my name—and the name Rhiannon—have to do with all this."

"Branwen—the name means 'white crow'—would have been Rigantona, or Rhiannon, in her benevolent or innocent aspect. The name 'Rhiannon,' by the way, is thought to have been corrupted into 'Niniane,' another name for the Lady of the Lake."

"Wasn't she the same as Malory's 'Nyneve' and Tennyson's 'Vivien'?"

"Yes. The name 'Nin' is one of the oldest in the world. In Sumerian it meant 'the lady' and referred to their great goddess, Ishtar. 'Nineveh' means 'the city of the lady.' It may just be coincidence, of course, that Niniane was also called 'Nyneve,' as you mentioned, but who's to say how far back the memory of man extends?"

"As Niniane, the Lady of the Lake was Arthur's friend," I commented.

"Yes, but she was also the minx who lured Merlin into a cave and shut him up forever."

"Well, I can't exactly blame her. She was married to a handsome, young knight and then this old man in his dotage starts chasing her all over Europe. She had to get rid of him somehow."

"But in a cave? After all, his only crime was loving her." He chuckled. "I see you women are all alike—heartless and cruel—true daughters of Rigantona, who was worshiped with cannibalistic rites, you know."

"No, I didn't know."

"Yes, indeed, our ancestors were all cannibals. That's echoed in the story of Pryderi and the blood smeared on his mother's mouth. Possibly in the original version of the myth, Rhiannon actually ate her son."

The coals in his eyes burned bright, holding me both entranced and aghast.

"How horrible!" I said at last. "If Aunt Megan had known that

I'll bet she never would have given that name to her darling daughter—"

I stopped, stunned and furious—at him for his trickery and at myself for being so stupid. And yet, strangely, there was almost a feeling of relief that I was being pushed so close to the brink, that the moment when I would tell him was inevitable.

"You had a cousin named Rhiannon?" His tone suddenly was professional. "You never mentioned her."

"Oh, she died when I was quite young. She was four years older—" I tried to sound casual.

"How old were you at the time she died?"

"Nine."

"Then you must remember her quite well. Didn't you tell me earlier that your parents were identical twins who married each other? Was this their child?"

"Yes, she was my double cousin," I answered miserably, "but she lived in the country and I was brought up in the city."

"You and she would have had identical bloodlines. Were you together much?"

"Not too much. School kept us apart."

"What about vacation time?"

"We spent some vacations together," I admitted.

"How did you feel toward her?"

"I—I admired her very much." I could say that with some conviction. "She rode horseback like—like a Centaur—and she was very efficient."

"But you didn't like her."

"I didn't say that."

"Neither did you say you liked her."

I bit my lip and was silent.

"You're not cooperating with me, Branwen," he reproved me. "This is your sixth visit and I know very little more about you than what your husband has already told me. In fact, I'll bet you never mentioned your cousin Rhiannon to him or he wouldn't have been so puzzled when you used that name. But if you won't

do your part, you'll have just wasted your money and my time. What can I do to make you trust me?"

"It isn't that I don't trust you, Dr. Ambrose," I replied. "It's just because I've come to trust you so much—I mean, I believe you really do want to help me, even if you have to trick me to do it—that I'm afraid of you. That doesn't make much sense, does it?"

"Yes, it does make sense," he said, turning to answer the phone. "Pardon me." He excused himself, motioning me to keep my seat.

I didn't want to seem to be listening to his conversation, so I opened my handbag to get out my makeup, as I knew I had been biting my lips naked. The next thing I knew I was holding my fountain pen in one hand and a small notebook in the other. Across the page to which it was opened I noticed a hasty scrawl:

"Let me out. I want to talk to the doc, too."

I brushed my hand across it, smearing the ink. There was no question but that it had been written in that instant and by my hand, even though it was not my handwriting. I stared at it as the uneven letters began to distort, curling and crawling across the page, which faded into an atomized distance as waves of dizziness engulfed me—*waves washing over me, receding and returning, reaching for me with frothy talons, then faltering and breaking upon the sand. I was running along the shore under a lowering sky, with a sheer cliff to my left, the greedy waters to my right, and the beach growing narrower and narrower, but someone was calling to me to turn back to wider, safer ground. I wheeled and struggled toward it—*

"Branwen?" Dr. Ambrose, phone still in hand, was watching me with alarm.

"I—I'm all right," I assured him weakly.

He concluded his call quickly and, coming around the desk more rapidly than I had ever seen him move before, drew up a chair beside me.

"What happened? I thought you were going to faint. I was just about to call my secretary to get you something."

"No–no, don't do that." I was drawn into the deeps of those black eyes and suddenly the power to resist them was gone. "I–I'll tell you about it–about everything, if you'll promise me one thing."

"What is that?"

"That you'll respect my confidence and not tell Alan anything that I don't want you to. It's not that I wish to deceive my husband, but I think he'd be happier not knowing some of this–at least not for now. He might not understand–I wouldn't blame him if he didn't–and I'm so afraid it would undermine our marriage."

The pact sealed, I told my story haltingly at first, but as I proceeded, the words flowed with increasing ease. When I at last broached my theory that Rhiannon had somehow attached her personality to mine, I stopped, searching his face for signs of derision or contempt, but he merely sat there, his eyes half-closed like those of a sleepy owl, saying nothing.

"You think that's impossible? That I'm crazy or something?" I asked apprehensively.

"Why don't you finish before I comment?" he said, then, relenting, he added, "I'll say one thing–I think you exaggerate your condition."

Reassured, I told him everything, even the wild statements Rhiannon had made about Timmy's death and about the baby. Last of all I handed over the note I had in my hand.

"This was written just now in your office while you were on the phone–without my knowledge–and yet I am sure that it was my hand that wrote it. There just couldn't have been any other. What–or who–makes me do these things? You've got to believe me, Dr. Ambrose, I'm not faking this."

He scanned the note carefully. "Yes," he said, looking up, "it ties in with the typewritten one your husband gave me. And I believe you when you say you're not faking. Are you willing to submit to hypnosis, Branwen?"

"Yes–I suppose so. But why?"

"I think it would open up things in the subconscious mind that you can't consciously bring to the surface."

"You mean, you want to talk to her, don't you?" I asked.

"If she exists. Yes, I do, if I possibly can."

He looked at his watch. "I'm afraid we've run out of time today. Besides, I want you to go home and think about this—that it's something you really want to do. I assure you, it won't give me undue power over you—"

"Don't worry. I know the Svengali bit was exploded long ago."

"True, but hypnotism in the hands of an amateur or criminal is still a dangerous weapon, particularly in the area of posthypnotic suggestion."

"I'm sure Dr. Gordon would never have recommended you if he didn't have complete confidence in you."

He looked at his appointment book. "You're booked for tomorrow, aren't you?" he remarked.

"Yes, I am."

His face lighted up and I felt warmed by the glow of it.

"Then tomorrow it is!" he said, shaking my hand.

I went out, feeling as though the only weight I had for the moment was the baby—that I had left my other burden still seated in the chair.

13

My euphoria was short-lived. Alan was in a foul humor when he picked me up in front of the Glass Tower. At first he drove silently and I sat beside him saying nothing, knowing that sooner or later he would burst out with whatever was bothering him, but it had to be in his own good time, not at my insistence. It didn't take long. Jim, it seemed, was having trouble in Kentucky, trouble that Alan, with his extensive field experience, would have avoided. Jim had been calling at various intervals during the afternoon for advice, which was difficult and frustrating to give over the phone.

To add to that, Alan was having his own difficulties at the office. There Jim was king, a neat, methodical king, who kept files of drawings in perfect order. Those cabinets were Jim's special joy and Alan's particular torment, not just because filing was a job my husband hated, but because Jim had his own peculiar system of filing that neither Alan nor Archimedes himself would ever have been able to figure out. Not even the secretary was allowed to touch those cabinets, and the only other person who had the remotest notion of Jim's system was the junior engineer, who was on vacation at the moment.

Go ahead, I thought, as he continued to fume, *why don't you say it? It's all my fault. If I were like any normal woman, none of this would have happened.*

But Alan didn't say it. Instead, with typical male persistence, he went on to bemoan all his problems at home. The storm windows needed painting, the mower should be removed from the garden tractor and the snowblower readied in its place, leaves were piling up on the lawn, my steam iron was leaking, the kitchen disposal had ground to a halt that morning, the hose was broken on the vacuum cleaner, the toaster wouldn't pop down, and both cars not only needed winterizing, but the muffler on his was beginning to go, and a tire was flat on mine.

I sincerely hoped Mrs. Lemke's sauerbraten and dumplings would be ready when we got home. Mrs. Lemke's son had just been drafted, and as she dreaded the prospect of a dismal winter alone on the farm, she was delighted when we asked her to live with us at least until spring. Since Dr. Gordon had strictly forbidden me to drive (after the mauling I'd had, he feared I might deliver too early—so he said), she always took me down to the doctor's office and Alan picked me up afterward.

The house was spicy with the odor of sauerbraten when we arrived, but Mrs. Lemke met Alan with more bad news. The pump in the floor cistern had burned out and she was afraid there wouldn't be enough water in the standing cistern for her wash the next day, since rainfall that autumn had been slight. After dinner Alan went glumly down to the basement to replace the ailing pump with the spare one, and I clambered after him with the worklight, glad to be of some use at last, for all through the dinner I had hardly been able to eat for thinking of the trouble I was causing. Our increased expenses with psychotherapy and Mrs. Lemke precluded calling in outside help to fix appliances. Alan was fairly expert, but he resented the time it took. What a burden I was! I felt like an inmate in the house and suspected that, in spite of Alan's denials, Mrs. Lemke's presence full-time and Dr. Gordon's orders not to drive had been prompted more

by the fear that I might be seized with amnesia while driving or alone in the house than concern for the baby.

Alan wrenched the nails out of the cistern cover, muttering to himself that someday, if he ever had time, he was going to put in brass screws instead of nails, and disclosed the murky pool that underlay the house. It was really huge, this cistern, reaching far beneath the basement floor. Removing the pump was not the easy job he expected it to be. Something was caught underneath, and he had to lean way over to get at it, all the while alternately cursing and directing me which way to hold the light. It wasn't easy, bending over him this way, as the weight of the baby unbalanced me badly. I clung to one of the supporting pillars to keep from falling, my arms and back aching, but I didn't want to complain. So much was being done for me, and no matter how much Alan grumbled, he never took it out on me personally. I wished he would—that he would vent his temper on me as he used to do occasionally, but now he was so pointedly kind and considerate, I felt like a cripple.

As I held on, my glance wandered to the old stained mirror that we had taken from the ballroom and propped up against the wall of the basement. *What an unwieldy monster!* I thought, noting my swollen body with disgust. My face, blotched though the mirror made it seem, wasn't too bad, I decided, as I looked into my blue eyes gazing back at me, those eyes Rhiannon had so disdained. For a moment they reminded me of Purrcival's, wide and guileless, then they began to narrow. Alan was hanging way out over the water, his back to me, his hold on the pipe precarious. The eyes stared back at me unblinking and I felt my hand impelled forward. No! I would not! I tried to resist, but the weight of the child pulled me completely off-balance and I fell against Alan, managing just in time to throw away the work-light so that it clanked harmlessly on the floor as we both pitched into the cistern.

Alan had us out in seconds, sputtering and soaked to the skin, both of us. Ordinarily we would have had a good laugh out of it,

but he was concerned about the baby and furious with himself for not having had Mrs. Lemke hold the light instead of me.

"How could I be so stupid! I should have remembered you're rather unseaworthy at the moment."

Then he noticed the light on the floor, the bulb broken. "That was quick thinking—tossing the worklight away as you fell," he complimented me. "We could have been electrocuted. Good thing one of us had some sense." He took my face in his hand and searched my eyes worriedly. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine and I don't think it jarred the baby a bit," I assured him. "After all, it's cushioned in water anyway."

Maybe I had only imagined the face in the mirror and the impulse raising my hand. I might just have lost my balance. However it was, I had the feeling that I had bested her—for the moment.

14

HAD MRS. LEMKE not driven me to the Glass Tower the following day—had I been driving alone—I might have just stayed on the freeway rather than turning off the usual exit ramp, and driven and driven—.

But what road leads to Nowhere today? There is always a Somewhere, inevitably fraught with the same realities as the one you've just fled. We're bound by the web of civilization, and no matter how humanity struggles and rebels, youth into drugs and disordered living, and man into space, the spider weaves on. Even in the green and gold mystery of Uncle Peter's cornfields, where I used to try to lose myself when I was little, the long rows were finite, and no matter which swaying, whispering avenue I followed, I eventually came back to reality.

The thought of being hypnotized both intrigued and terrified me. Here was an escape into the unknown, but I feared it might be just another turnpike leading to an unwelcome reality, with a frightful toll at its gate. I had no qualms about hidden guilt—I had told Dr. Ambrose everything. It was what he would find out about her, if anything, and, more particularly, the diagnosis that might be forthcoming, that I dreaded. All the way up in the ele-

vator I felt myself sinking even as the car rose. I looked at the faces of those about me, each in his own little world, and I marveled at the light years of space between us, crushed together as we were in the confined area of the elevator.

And then I was in his office, seated in the big red naugahyde contour chair, talking to him as if no time had elapsed since the day before.

"Now don't be disappointed if it doesn't happen the first time," Dr. Ambrose was telling me. "Sometimes it takes several tries to put a patient under hypnosis, which is merely the power of suggestion, you know. You have to learn to be in complete rapport with the operator for it to work."

"Just promise me you'll bring *me* back before you wake my body up, will you?" I tried to say it lightly, but I meant every word.

He smiled reassuringly. "That's a promise. Now, would you lean your chair back and make yourself completely comfortable?"

I did as I was told, expecting him to bring out a crystal ball or a pendant of some kind—the old-fashioned watch fob with the pentacle design that he wore would have done nicely—but he did nothing of the sort. He pulled his chair over next to mine, folded his arms, drew down his lids over his eyes, and began talking to me in a slow, drowsy voice.

"Pick out a spot on the ceiling and concentrate on it—"

I chose one of the more prominent knots on the wood-paneled ceiling and tried to keep it directly in my line of vision, but he was telling me that my eyelids were becoming heavier and heavier, and it was difficult to keep the knot in the same place. It was twisting and distorting—no longer a burl in the wood, but as though the pentacle on the doctor's watch fob were projected above me.

"—heavy—heavy—your lids are so heavy—keep watching—your lids are beginning to close—they're so very heavy—you can't hold them open any longer—"

That wasn't true. I could open my eyes if I pleased. I tried,

but they fluttered and sank like curtains over the pentacle.

"–you are going into a deep sleep–every muscle is relaxing–"

The chair was inexpressibly comfortable. *But if this is all there is to it, I can do that myself,* I thought, disappointed.

"Now your right hand is becoming very tired," he intoned. "Very, very tired. You may try to lift it, but you can't."

I could have lifted it, but it wasn't worth the trouble.

"Deeper and deeper. You won't wake up until I tell you to, but when you do you'll feel better than you have for a long time."

The weight of the baby was pushing me down. I felt an itch on my back, but somehow I didn't have the energy to scratch it–

His voice droned relentlessly on, soothing me, sedating me. I no longer had to open my eyes to see the pentacle. It remained suspended on the interior of my heavy lids. One by one my limbs relaxed and the chair became airborne and weightless–

"Deeper and deeper. . . ."

". . . five!"

I sat up and looked around, hearing a click and a scraping sound as I did so. Dr. Ambrose had risen and was leaning over the tape recorder, reversing the reels.

"I'm sorry, Doctor," I apologized. "I really thought you had me going for a while there–I felt like I was floating–but then I snapped out of it–I don't know why. Perhaps I'm not a very good subject. Maybe if we try again–"

My voice trailed off as I watched him settle back into his chair, the pentacle on the watch chain picking up the gleam of his desk lamp as he did so. Perhaps he might say that this failure made it all useless, that no further attempt would be made, but then I saw that he was smiling.

"On the contrary," he said, "you're an extraordinarily good hypnotic subject. You reached a state of somnambulism on the first try and that is unusual."

"But you were just saying 'deeper and deeper,' then spoke the word 'five' and I woke up."

"Do you realize how much time elapsed between those two points? More than a half hour."

I felt my eyes widen in disbelief. "Th—that's impossible!"

"If you don't believe me, look at your watch."

I did and it verified his statement.

"Then what—what?" The question hovered on my lips, unuttered.

"What happened?" he read me. "Before I go into that, do you know anything about multiple or dissociated personalities?"

I had heard the terms but really didn't know what they meant. Whatever they were, they sounded ominous and complicated.

"Very little," I admitted.

"There was a best-seller a few years back, you may remember. It was called *The Three Faces of Eve*."

"I saw the movie, but I thought it was more Hollywood than truth."

"No, it was based on an actual case history by two contemporary psychiatrists. There've been others, too. For instance, there was a classic one recorded in the early part of this century of a Miss Beauchamp who had four personalities. For that matter, Eve also had four—not just three! The phenomenon is rare. However, I think I saw another example of it today."

"You mean I—"

He ignored my interjection. "I can't make a firm diagnosis at this point but it is certainly a possibility. I want to work with you very intensively during the next few weeks."

"But we can't afford any more than the twice a week I'm coming now."

"There will be no extra charge. Who knows?"—he teased me—"I may get a book out of you."

"Granted—providing I get a share in the royalties," I shot back at him.

He looked at me approvingly. "That's one of the healthiest signs about you, Branwen—the fact that you can recognize a joke and trade one right back. Now I'm going to play this tape

for you, and I must tell you that with many patients I wouldn't do so at this stage, so you can take courage from that. However, I must warn you—this won't be easy for you. It's going to confuse, perhaps frighten you. I have to prepare you for that. But basically, I think your Branwen personality is well-defined and developed, strong enough for you to know the truth."

"My Branwen personality," I repeated. "Then there is another one?"

"Oh yes, I met her."

I felt a quiver of terror. "Rhiannon?" I barely whispered.

The inner glow in his eyes intensified.

"Your Rhiannon is an imposter," he said. "I'd suspected as much. She's not what you think, and her real name is Phoebe."

15

An eternity of time and distance elapsed during the few seconds in which Dr. Ambrose switched on the tape recorder and several inches of blank tape ran off the spindles. Then came the commands I remembered him giving me, and for a moment it was almost as if my chair had become suspended again. His hand on mine brought me out of this compulsion to reenter the hypnotic state as the tape reeled off new commands, words I couldn't recall now, that had taken me down the steep grade into hypnosis.

"You are deep—deeply asleep. Your eyes are closed tight. Tight! So tight you cannot open them even if you want to, no matter how hard you try. You cannot open your eyelids. They seem glued together. You cannot open them. Go ahead and try."

There was a pause; then he resumed.

"You see, you tried, but you couldn't. You are sinking deeper and deeper. Now when I tell you, I want you to—"

"Hello, Doc! Fooled you, didn't I?" A blithe, impish voice broke in. "You thought you had me hypnotized, didn't you? Were you going to call me out? Well, I didn't want to wait for you to do

that, because I wouldn't want you to think for a minute that you can work that hocus-pocus stuff on me. On Branwen, yes. On me? Uh-uh! I come and go as I please—no, that's not right. That's what I'd like to do, but I have to wait for Branwen to go to sleep, or be tired, or upset about something so her control isn't good. That's why I play tricks on her. They send her into a tailspin and then it's easy to get out. You did fine—just fine! The way you put her down! I wish I knew how to do that—would you teach me? No, I can see you won't. Well, maybe I can make you change your mind later on. For now, let's just talk. I've been itching to talk to you ever since she started therapy."

"Then you're not Branwen?"

She laughed lightly. "Do I look like that droop?"

"Branwen's no droop," I heard him say. "She just has a lot of things bothering her right now—you, for one. It's not very nice of you, you know."

"It's not very nice of her to keep me cooped up all the time either. C'mon, Doc, compared to me she's a droop. Can't you see that? No, no, don't look at my belly—that's her fault. Look at my eyes, my lips. I know how to use them, don't I?"

"Don't waste them on me. I'm much too old," his voice rasped. I shot a glance at him as he listened and saw a knot working in his cheek.

"Just because your hair's white? I think that's distinguished. You're not flabby like that Senator. When he started to take off his clothes and I saw the folds of fat hanging over his girdle, I said to myself—'Uh-uh, not for me!' So, I left him to Branwen. Besides, I never meant to get serious with him anyway. It was sort of a game—him being a Senator and all that. But you—I could get other ideas about you. Not like Branwen! You know what you are to her? A father figure! That's not very flattering, is it? Well, that's the way she is. Romantic? Yes, very! But sexy? She'd rather curl up with a book. Poor Alan! That's what made it so easy for me to take over. But I overplayed that one. She caught wind of me and—well, she's not dumb, you know. She

made Alan feel like he was on a honeymoon again and that was bad for me. But just you wait until she has the baby. She'll get involved with that—along with her books, of course—and I'll have my lover back again."

"Isn't Alan your husband?"

"Me—married? I wouldn't tie myself down. Oh, Alan's a doll, but I want to be free. I want to enjoy life—to go places—to dance—to have people all around me—to touch, touch, touch—everyone and everything—"

She must have tried to rise and cavort around the room, as I heard the chair scrape and thud.

"Damn, this thing in my stomach's heavy!" she exclaimed. "I don't know why she had to go get pregnant again. It's bad for my figure."

"How do you know it's not your baby?"

"You think I can't count? Don't worry, *I* was careful. A baby would definitely cramp my style, don't you agree, Doc?"

The tape rustled past during a long pause, then his voice again, strained and circumspect: "You haven't told me your name."

"That's right, I haven't, have I? And I suppose that's not fair since I know yours—Dr. Ambrose!"

"Perhaps I do know your name already. Are you Rhiannon?"

Her laughter rippled like water dripping onto shelf rock.

"No! I just use that name to tease her. It started as a joke, but Alan liked it and it worries her, which gives me more chance to get out. Hey, Big Man, don't keep moving away. I won't bite! I just want to touch you—to run my fingers the length of your long, strong hands—they're so beautifully shaped—so sensitive! They're almost like antennae. Do you think with your hands sometimes?"

"Your name! You still haven't told me your name."

"You are persistent, aren't you? I was going to keep you guessing for a while. But if you must know, it's Phoebe."

"Phoebe! Where did you get that name?"

"Out of one of Branwen's myth books. I considered Aphro-

dite for a while–she had a lot of things going for her, you know. Can't you just see me rising out of the sea on a shell? But Aphrodite was too long and Venus sounds corny, so I took Phoebe. It means 'bright moon' and I thought that was pretty."

"How long have you been around?"

"Now, Big Man, would you be asking my age? I don't mind. I'm younger than she is anyway–by several years, I think. All of a sudden I was just there, but I was more a part of her then –and yet not entirely. I remember things she did, as if I was always there looking on. I saw Rhiannon die. We're so different. It seems like I was made up out of parts Branwen didn't use for her personality–the best parts, I say. I do run on, don't I? But it's so seldom I ever get to talk to anyone. Here, turn this way– that dimple in your cheek–here–just below your right eye–"

"That's a wrinkle." He growled. "Sit down, Phoebe! I'm taking this all down on tape."

"But you're a doctor," she protested lightly. "You can't tell on me."

"Nevertheless, I'm going to ask you to let me play this back to Branwen."

"Why?" I could almost see her pouting. "I like things the way they are. I can pick her brains, but she never knows what *I'm* thinking. That way I can play tricks on her."

"Exactly, and you've caused her a lot of harm, both mentally and physically. Unless I can make her understand what's going on, something terrible might happen to her."

"You mean like–suicide?" For the first time there was a hint of fear in her voice.

"She came close to it once."

"You don't have to tell *me!* She really had me scared that time. It wasn't like her, running out in the fog like that. I don't know what made her do it. At times it seemed like she was hanging back as hard as I was trying to hold her back–that someone else was trying to get her to jump, but I didn't see anybody. She kept

talking in a crazy way as if there were though. She was in a terrible state."

"You can hardly blame her, Phoebe, after the things you told her."

"Things? What things?"

"Didn't you say you smothered her first baby?"

"Why would I say that? *She* was going on about something like that, but I thought she'd flipped. I wouldn't have hurt Timmy, even if he was a bother--all those smelly diapers--but they were *her* problem, not mine. He was a cute little fellow. Why would I want to kill him?"

"And didn't you tell her that you'd gone to bed with the painter and that she'd have a black baby?"

"No--at least, I don't remember saying that."

"Well, did you?"

"Did I what?"

"Take the painter to bed--like Alan?"

"No." Her tone was emphatic.

"Do you always tell the truth, Phoebe?"

"I'm telling the truth now."

"But do you always to Branwen?"

"Of course not," she confessed blithely. "It's so much fun to make up things--to see what wild lies I can make her believe. They just seem to bubble out--I mean, I'll be inside, waiting for a chance to come out, and all of a sudden I can't resist telling the most delicious fibs. The worse they are the more seriously she takes them. I don't know where I get the ideas or what makes me say such things. They just pop into my head. And afterward I've forgotten all about what I've said."

"Then you might have made up that story about the painter?"

"I might have, but I don't recall it. It's funny--I always know what she's doing when she's out and I remember it, too, but I don't always remember what I say."

"Then you could have told her you killed the baby."

"I–I suppose so." She spoke with obvious reluctance. "But if I did–man, I was way out!"

"Why do you enjoy tormenting Branwen?"

"I told you before–it's not so much that I want to hurt her, but she's so strong-minded that I have to beat her down to get out. It's not fair for her to be in control all the time and for me to have to stay inside. I have my rights, too, don't you think?"

"Yes, I do."

"I knew you'd feel that way. You like me, don't you, Big Man?"

"Of course, I do."

"You don't think of me as just another Eve Black, do you? I saw the movie, too, you know. You wouldn't say Branwen is like Eve White, would you?"

"Far from it!"

"Well, I won't be treated like Eve Black either–or, or that Sally Beecham, whoever she was. I'm a whole me! I'm Phoebe! I'm a real person. I can prove it to you. Would you take me out sometime? After the baby's born, I mean? It'd be a snap. You'd just hypnotize her and we could go dancing–or sailing in the moonlight. Oh, Big Man, please! I've never been asked anywhere just for myself. You don't know what it's like to be–what I am. Alan wouldn't know–he'd be out of town. Look at me! Take a good look, Big Man!"

There was a pause and then, sternly, "No, Phoebe, that won't do!"

I looked up and saw the doctor's heavy brows knitted together.

"Now be a good girl and sit down." He had switched to cajolery. "You're a very attractive young lady. However, there's one thing you must understand–I never become involved with a patient."

She was unperturbed.

"Or with anyone else for a long time, have you, Big Man? Listen, lover, I'm no patient of yours. I'm just–somebody you know."

He cleared his throat–or it might have been static.

"You want to help Branwen, don't you?" he asked.

She hesitated. "You're still taking this down on tape, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am. Now, you want to help Branwen, don't you?"

"Yes—yes, I suppose so."

"Then don't do anything to destroy the doctor-patient relationship."

"I told you—I'm not your patient."

"I mean between Branwen and me. If you do, I'll have to refer her to another psychiatrist."

"You wouldn't!"

"Oh, yes, I would!"

A sigh. "All right then, I'm sorry, Doc."

"Don't be sorry. I'm flattered. Now where were we? Oh yes, I want to ask you again—*did* you have an affair with the painter?"

"No! I told you that before! Don't you believe me?"

"I want to—very much. And I also want Branwen to believe that nothing of the sort occurred. It's essential to her health and the baby's."

"Of course, I didn't! Do you think I'm nuts? Run the risk of having a bastard that Alan would know wasn't his? Not me! I didn't know then that we were already pregnant."

"Well, you weren't, were you?"

"She doesn't think so, but Dr. Gordon suspects she miscalculated—that maybe we had a couple of periods after the baby was conceived. Some women do, you know."

"Then she's due to deliver in January, not February."

"That's right. And it makes sense. We felt life very early, and look how big I am! I sure hope the doctor's right."

"And you're positive there was nothing between you and the painter."

"Absolutely! That's one day I remember well. I spent it cleaning house. Branwen makes me so mad, living in her dreams all the time. I swear, Alan could drop his coat on the floor and she'd walk right by it and never notice. I like things neat."

"In other words, as a housekeeper she leaves something to be desired."

"Lousy! Oh, don't misunderstand me—she's not dirty. She does a lot of unnecessary things I'd never bother with—like rinsing her dishes in soapy water before putting them in the dishwasher. But she's no good at straightening up. Papers, papers! We're going to be drowned in papers someday—and books, too."

"You enjoy housekeeping?"

"No, I don't, but it's one of those things you can't get off your back. Besides, the other one would get mad at me if I didn't keep things in order."

"That's understandable for a man."

"Oh, I don't mean Alan! He's about as untidy as she is. I mean the other one. Didn't you know? There're three of us."

"Three!" Surprise and eagerness ruptured the calm surface of his voice. "Are you sure? What's the other one like?"

"I don't know. I can't even tell you her name—if she has one—but she's way deep down inside. I never know what she's thinking, but she knows my thoughts—and Branwen's, too. I don't know if she ever gets out, but I don't think so—at least, I've never seen her. She's awfully strongwilled though. I always have to do whatever she tells me to, even if I don't want to, or she won't let me out. *She's* the one who's most particular about the house, but I always have to do the work and I don't think that's fair."

"Do you know her name?"

"No. I'm not even sure she has one."

"Could it be Rhiannon?"

"I doubt it. I told you—that's my name when I want it to be."

"No, I mean—have you ever thought this might be the real Rhiannon?"

"Come back from the dead?" There was an audible "Hmph!" "Say, I thought you were a psychiatrist—not a sorcerer."

"Maybe that's what's happened to sorcerers. We now go to medical school and become psychiatrists."

I could hear her giggle.

"Seriously," he continued, "I have to investigate every facet of the mind."

"I suppose you do. Well, as far as there being a real Rhiannon, I think it's all in Branwen's imagination. That's what she gets for reading all those legends and fairy tales. When she sees a tree she sees dryads and satyrs dancing around it. Me—I see a tree!"

"Why did you tell Alan your name was Rhiannon?"

"Because I knew he would call her that name sometime and scare her out of her wits. Besides, can you imagine what would have happened if he'd used the name 'Phoebe' to Branwen? She would have thought it was some other girl—in another body, I mean—and they'd have quarreled and maybe even have split up, and *then* where would I be?"

"Do you realize that you might cause Branwen to have a mental breakdown?"

"So? Then I could take over."

"Would you want to go to an institution? Because if she goes, you do, too."

"You mean where all the loonies go?" Distress was apparent in her voice. "I wouldn't like that, Big Man—you know I wouldn't. I'm kept in enough as it is."

"Or you might drive her to suicide. Then where would you be?"

"What you want is for me just to go back in and stay in like a good girl. Well, I won't do it. That would be kinda suicide, too."

"No, I'm not asking you to do that. We're going to work out some kind of understanding with Branwen."

"I don't know if I like that. I like me as I am."

"But if you were to merge with Branwen you could stay out all the time."

"I have an easier answer—just let me stay out now." She was like a child pleading to delay bedtime.

"Glad to—if you want to carry the baby around."

"Oh, I forgot, dammit! No, I'd rather go back in for now. I

never was meant for motherhood. But after the baby comes, then what are you going to do with the two of us?"

"Or the three?"

"Forget about her. What about the two of us?"

"Somehow I want to make you two come to terms with each other."

"But we want such different things."

"You want the same man. There's a starting point."

"Alan? I'm not so sure I want him anymore—not now I've met you. You're much more interesting. I think you could really love a woman if you'd just let yourself go. You know so much—I'm very ignorant. I'd just sit at your feet and listen to you tell things—you know, like how the world began, and where we come from, and why we act like we do. And then I'd teach you the one thing I know, and that's how to love. Do you think I'd make a good love goddess?"

How totally disarming this Phoebe was, I thought, as the recorder reeled off his hearty laugh. A dawn creature—simple, direct, amoral, and guileful. I think of her now as a disembodied spirit, vexatious at times, yet fascinating.

"All right, love goddess," he said, "let's get back to my earlier question. Would you be willing to have Branwen hear this tape? It's only fair, you know. You've been listening in on her for a long time."

"If I refuse—you'll play it to her anyway, won't you?"

"As you said—you're not my patient."

"Sometimes you don't talk like a doctor, Big Man. You play according to the rules as long as they serve you, but if need be, you'd bend the laws of man and nature—isn't that so? There's something about you—as if I'd met you before—in one of Branwen's books maybe—"

"Now don't let's get off the track." He brought her back swiftly. "I want your answer."

"I don't see that I have any choice," she replied. "I can't refuse you, you know that. Mind you, I'm not too happy about it—her

hearing all this, I mean. She'll be shocked at some of it, you know. And I've rattled off a lot of things I should never have said, but I'd hate to find myself going off a cliff someday or having electric shock treatments."

"Good girl! Now what do you know about the real Rhiannon?"

"Enough. I never liked her. Although I couldn't get out until after she died, I did observe plenty and from what I saw and what I've read in Branwen's mind, Rhiannon was a bitch and deserved everything she got. I wouldn't feel guilty one bit–I can't see why Branwen does. Best thing she ever did–shutting her up in that freezer. *I* wouldn't even have tried to rescue her."

"Rhiannon's death doesn't bother you?"

"Good riddance, I call it. Besides, I got stronger after that."

"But you never got out until this year. Why was that?"

"Oh, but I did, often! I told you so. She just didn't know about it."

"When was the first time?"

"I don't remember exactly, but it was way before she met Alan. It was hard to do at first and I could only manage to stay out a few seconds. Then, when she was working, I had to be careful because I didn't want to do something that might make her lose her job. I like to eat just like anybody else. Besides, I didn't have as much need to get out then. She and I got around a lot and met people and had fun and saw things in the world. But after she got married and buried herself in those damn books I got bored and decided to make a break for it."

"In those early days–did you ever have any sexual encounters?"

"No. Would you believe it? I was a real innocent kid then. I didn't know what I was missing. Oh, I had feelings, but I didn't understand what they were all about until she was married."

He changed the subject. "Did you check out Dr. Reuben's book?"

"N–no."

"Phoebe!" he cautioned, as one would a child.

"All right—yes, I did!" There was defiance in her tone.

"As a prank?"

"No, it was educational and a lot more interesting than the stuff she reads."

"And then you wrote the review."

"I don't remember—honest! I *guess* maybe I did. I told you, lots of things I do go right out of my head afterward." A plaintive note crept into her voice. "Are you almost through? I'm getting tired."

"Of being out?"

"Not that, ever! But if all you're going to do is ask questions about my relationship with her, I'm going to be bored. Why can't you just be interested in me?"

"I'm very much interested in you."

"But not in the right way. There *will* be other times, won't there?" Wistfully.

"Of course, Phoebe. I'm going to be talking to you often, but this has been enough for today. Ready to go back?"

"I suppose so." With a sigh. "Anyway, I'm sick of holding up this big belly. Ouch! The damn thing kicks! G'bye. Remember, you promised you'd call me out again. Big Man—I love. . . ."

There was a hiatus and then the doctor's voice on the last few inches of tape.

"Listen to me, Branwen. I'm going to play this back to you when you awake. Later I'll give you a transcript of it, so you can study it and come to understand it more. It will be a shock to you, I know. Perhaps I could dull the shock posthypnotically, but that would be like treating appendicitis with morphine. It would kill the pain but leave the disease. You must fight this thing with your own awareness and intellect. I suggest only that nothing about this is irremediable and that you marshal all your resources to meet it. I shall remind you again, after I bring you out of hypnosis, that your case is not hopeless. Now, Branwen, when I count five you are to be wide awake. Wake up, Branwen—one—two—three—four—five—"

16

For the first few seconds after the recorder stopped I sat there in a semi-stupor—Dr. Ambrose watching me like a brooding hawk.

Now he will pounce upon me and tear me to shreds psychologically, was my first thought.

But he only sat there and my momentary wave of apprehension passed. The look in his eyes was one of kindly concern.

"I can't comprehend it," I said finally. "It's too fantastic! How can I possibly grasp the fact that two personalities live in this body? That there's an invisible being who—but then, she isn't invisible when she's in control, is she? *I'm* the one who is!"

I stared down at the solidity of my hands clasped tightly over my swollen stomach.

My baby! How can I be a mother? Or a wife? I've got to get away from this!

I struggled to heave my cumbersome body out of the chair, looking wildly toward the door. Gentle hands took me by the shoulders and pressed me back down.

"Wait, Branwen," the doctor commanded, "let's add things up and see where we really are. You had to know the truth. Now,

if you'll just listen quietly, you'll see that your case is not hopeless."

Not hopeless, I repeated automatically to myself, as suggestion rose to bolster suggestion—not hopeless, not hopeless!

"Number one—your case does *not* indicate insanity. Most insane are extremely uncooperative and not good hypnotic subjects."

"Then I'm not schizophrenic?" I dared ask.

"Not at all!" he assured me. "Schizophrenia is a psychosis. Dissociation of personality, on the other hand, is a neurosis."

"What's the difference?"

"In psychosis, the entire life of an individual is affected and he is rendered unable to relate socially to other people. Neurosis affects a person to a much lesser degree and is limited to certain disturbed behaviors, fears, repetitive patterns, gross anxiety, and so forth."

"And that's what I am—a neurotic?"

"Yes, we all are in varying degrees. You have a pronounced neurosis, but you, in spite of your fears and your understandably overstimulated imagination, have a very rational and self-analytical outlook. I see no evidence of your being delusory."

"But what about Phoebe?" I broke in.

"Phoebe is not a delusion—she's a fact. And as for the voices you say you hear, they cannot be classified as delusion either. A psychotic hears voices but doesn't think them extraordinary. You, on the other hand, are quite aware that this is abnormal, and it bothers you as it would any sane person. What's more, I believe you really do hear another voice—or voices. This is a common occurrence in cases of dissociated personalities. I think your particular case is a natural result of some very unusual circumstances. Had I been subjected to the same experiences, I'm not sure I'd have remained as rational as you have.

"Another important aspect of your case is that you are comparatively free of any persecution complex. Oh, you have conjectured that someone may be playing tricks on you, but that

was only an attempt to find a logical explanation. What I'm getting at is that you show no signs of paranoia. Were you paranoid, you'd probably suspect your husband of trying to drive you insane—the *Gaslight* syndrome, I call it—but you don't."

"Then I am sane?"

"Legally, yes, and medically, too, as far as I can see. You're disturbed, but who wouldn't be? I have every confidence that through an intensive program of therapy, your problem will be resolved. The other cases of dissociation I mentioned to you were concluded happily, so why shouldn't yours? And you have something going for you that they didn't, your innate sense of humor, and that's going to be invaluable help."

I could feel the hysteria gradually seeping out of me, and my hands, which had been clenching and unclenching, now lay quietly in my lap.

"Secondly," he proceeded, "your son died a normal death. Phoebe is far from a violent type and I believe her denial to be sincere. By her own admission she tells irresponsible lies that are cruel and frightening, and then forgets them immediately. She's not malicious; she's only insensitive the way a child is.

"Three—Phoebe did not involve you in any extramarital affairs. Of that I'm quite confident. I suspect that her sensuality is more talk than reality and it's quite possible that she would run from the actual thing. That was clear when she deserted ship to leave you to handle the Senator."

"She seems to be after you, Doctor."

"She's just playing games. I doubt if she really means anything by it. If I were to return her advances, she'd probably pull a fast retreat."

"She certainly didn't run from Alan, even though she doesn't consider herself married to him."

"Ah, but in spite of the fact that she rejects Alan as a spouse, she undoubtedly shares your feelings of intimacy with him. To put it bluntly, it's a situation she's grown used to."

I tensed. "But that's just it, Dr. Ambrose," I objected. "How can

I go on being a wife to Alan, knowing that we could never have a moment of privacy—that she'd always be there watching?"

His answer was phrased in deliberately obscure medical jargon that I find impossible to repeat now—something about working things out through therapy. I knew better than to press the point.

"Alan mustn't know!" I put in. "At least not yet. It might destroy our entire relationship. You promised, remember?"

He agreed that for the moment at least this was a wise course.

"Am I a freak, Doctor?" I asked.

He retrieved his pipe from the ashtray where he had let it die and went about the ritual of emptying, refilling, and lighting it, all the while talking in a studied largo.

"You're not a freak, Branwen, any more than the person who has a rare allergy. I personally have a theory that the potentiality for dissociation lies within all of us—and more than that, it actually happens to all of us, but so briefly and unobtrusively that we are never aware of it. In fact, I'm thinking of doing a paper on the subject. The old expression, 'being of two minds,' has more truth than we think. Everyone experiences the sensation of other voices speaking within one's self at times, but naturally, we don't talk about such things to others. There are many layers to the mind that we know nothing about—we in our modern, enlightened age are only on the threshold of its exploration."

"What causes a thing like this?"

"Possibly a severe trauma or shock in childhood—maybe a lingering sense of guilt that has been repressed."

"I know my guilt."

"Yes, but you repressed it for many years."

The discussion was hammering a sensitive nerve. I had to push it away. "Now I know what the Greeks meant when they talked of the Furies pursuing men for their crimes," I shifted the direction of our talk. "The most implacable Furies of all are the pangs of conscience."

"And you denied your Furies." He brought us back on course.

"Men used to go to the Delphic Oracle to learn what they

must do to propitiate the gods. Are you my oracle, Dr. Ambrose? Can you tell me what sacrifice to make?"

The pipe smoke curled around him. He shook his head. "Sacrifice is a negative remedy. People like you think the only way they can atone for their sins is to suffer some loss or torment. Instead, it would be far better to do something positive."

"That's what the priest in Dubuque said. He even cited Isaiah."

"Oh yes, positive thinking is very old. Even the Greeks practiced it. What did the oracle command Orestes to do to rid himself of the Furies? Make sacrifices? Not at all! She told him to recover the image of Artemis from the hostile Taurians."

I looked at him in surprise. "Why, Dr. Ambrose, you know your Greek myths, too!"

"Naturally. Myths are the greatest compendium of human behavior in all of literature. These stories will always be valid because they are universal. The Celtic myths were reworked from the Greek with additions from Sumerian, Egyptian, and Hebrew legends. The gods and goddesses were one—only their names were different. Athene was probably the prototype for Branwen, your namesake, by the way. She was the maiden goddess, as one of her symbols was the white crow. Demeter, like the original Rhiannon, was a horse goddess who devoured children."

I shook my head. "Horrible!"

Guilt feelings, however, might possibly not be the entire cause of my problem, he continued. While Rhiannon's death may have triggered the final cleavage between Phoebe and me, Phoebe had existed for some time prior to that. Something else might have happened at a very young age—some traumatic experience—that had also contributed to the dissociation, something I had forgotten. This might eventually be brought out under hypnosis, he said, but it would take time and careful analysis.

He was growing restive. Patients must be lined up in his waiting room. I pulled myself up and started for the door, then stopped and turned back to him. The most important question of all had

not been answered and I couldn't go home until it was. I wondered if he was deliberately avoiding it.

"This–this Phoebe," I began hesitantly. It wasn't easy to utter her name as one would another person's. "She mentioned another presence–"

"Ah yes–the mysterious presence that stays hidden."

"The presence Phoebe fears. Dr. Ambrose, I have to know–could that be Rhiannon?"

His eyes grew remote–like the black depths of a trackless forest.

"I would say"–he spoke slowly, thoughtfully–"that that's an extreme improbability. I balk at the word 'impossibility' as I've lived long enough to see the impossibilities of yesterday become the commonplaces of today. Speaking as a doctor, I have to say that, so far as we know now, transference of a soul from one body to another, or possession of a living person by the soul of a deceased individual, has never been proven. I think it is much more likely that the 'other one' to whom Phoebe refers is another personality within the same framework that developed later than she did and may not be as complete as she."

"Do you think that this hidden one could be evil or dangerous? That she might be the source of the threatening things I heard?"

"Yes, it's possible, but so far she seems to have a regulating effect on our scatterbrained Phoebe, even to keeping her down to serious housework."

A thought flitted briefly across my mind–if that didn't sound like Rhiannon trying to impress people again! But I rejected it quickly. As Dr. Ambrose said, such things weren't possible. I swept it aside with a joke:

"I suppose I should be grateful to have a built-in maid to do the chores while I'm off somewhere in inner space."

He chuckled. "Yes, I know a lot of women who'd sell their souls to have such a helper."

"That's it"–I laughed–"I've sold my soul to the devil, so now I have a clean house and a cluttered mind."

"I'm glad to see that sense of humor beginning to work again, Branwen. That will be your lodestar. Now go home, keep yourself busy, write your stories, knit things for the baby, and take care of that good husband of yours."

"Then you don't have any thought of committing me?"

"It's not indicated at the moment—certainly not before the baby is born. Later on, if I deem it advisable, I might want to hospitalize you for a short time, but it's too soon to tell about that. You have your own personality very well in hand. You don't show signs of the repressions or the martyr complex which are usually evident. I'm confident we'll eventually work out a compromise—a blending of the best of both—or all of you—"

I had started for the door, but his last words caught me up short.

"Then I wouldn't be *me* anymore," I protested.

"Yes, you would, because Phoebe is a part of you, too."

I made a negative sign with my hand. "It's hard for me to accept that—for the present anyway. Oh, I know I have a lot of faults, but I'm egotistical enough to—in spite of everything—I still want to be *me!*"

17

The activities Dr. Ambrose recommended, plus visits to his and Dr. Gordon's offices, and scores of other things that had to be attended to, helped me to keep a fair degree of equilibrium during the next few weeks. Dr. Ambrose had routed my main dread. Rhiannon was not reaching out to me from the other side. It was only Phoebe, and what could I possibly have to fear from her outside of playful mischief? And that seemed to have been discouraged by my pregnancy. In addition, Dr. Ambrose had allayed any apprehensions I had that I was losing my mind.

The senior days of the year flipped off the calendar in uneven tempo reminiscent of the leaves outside, which, one by one, lost their grip and drifted down to earth, only to be caught up in the caprice of the wind and gyrated like whirling dervishes over the deadening grass. Alan outfitted the house in its armor plate of storm windows. Mrs. Lemke fussed over the mincemeat she had stored in a large crock in the basement, adding ends of roasts and other goodies as time went on, and started her holiday cookies. In a spurt of energy I wrote my Christmas cards early for the first time in my life. My friends were going to have a shock this year.

Thanksgiving came in on a turkey's wing and went—down the disposal. Snowflakes danced with the leaves, then there were no more leaves to fall and the flakes had the stage to themselves as Christmas began to move in with a tall pine soaking in a bucket on the back porch, prior to taking its place of honor in the bay window. Outside, the lake hummed upon the beach with a frosty breath, its color gone from azure to wedgewood, and the cry of a laggard gull was a lonesome, occasional thing.

For the moment I felt safe. Phoebe continued to be repulsed by my advancing pregnancy and confined her appearances to sessions in the psychiatrist's office. She had become strangely sullen and uncommunicative, however, even though Dr. Ambrose no longer found it necessary to hypnotize me in order to call her forth. I, of course, knew her only through the tapes I listened to and the transcripts of them the doctor gave me, but it was apparent that the blitheness had gone out of her; once she broke down and cried. She said she felt everyone was against her, that no one had ever loved her, and that no matter how hard she struggled, she found herself losing contact with the outside. While I should have rejoiced at this, I found myself being actually sorry for her; she was so pathetic and forlorn.

At other times she wouldn't talk about herself at all, and if Dr. Ambrose asked her about the "other one," or "Madame X," as we had come to call her, Phoebe would retreat inward immediately and leave me in control again. She seemed to feel that she had said too much already and there was an aura of fear about her.

During one of my visits, Dr. Ambrose attempted, through hypnosis, to take me back into my childhood to see if he could find confirmation for his theory that some forgotten experience had led to the "birth" of Phoebe. When I came out of hypnosis there was a new air of excitement about him.

"I think we're on to something," he said. "Listen to this."

It is an eerie thing to hear one's voice backstepping through the years, becoming higher-pitched and more childlike, as the

vocabulary itself and manner of speaking steadily regresses. He started me at the age of eight and worked back, year by year. I babbled about memorable experiences, such as my first ride on Pryderi, the time my parents took me fishing and I promptly hooked the seat of my pants—but then went on to glory by catching the only legal fish of the day, a ball I lost, the doll I loved that Rhiannon smashed, the lion at the zoo that roared at me in a most unmannerly way, the time I got my head stuck between the bars of my crib and my mother fed me ice cream until my father extricated me—then suddenly, without warning, a small child's piercing shriek of rage, followed by a torrent of words, then more wails, some of pain as well as anger. The talk was so interlaced with sobs that words were hard to distinguish, but, quoting from the transcript Dr. Ambrose gave me, here is how they went:

"No, no, Daddy! Don't push me off! You're my Daddy! She can't have you. No! No! That's *my* Teddy! Bad baby! Bad baby!"

Dr. Ambrose's voice intervened, soothing and quieting, then: "Now it's all over. You've calmed down and you're a big girl now, but you still remember something that happened about your Daddy and a baby and a Teddy bear. Will you tell me about it?"

The voice that responded was flat and inflectionless. "I was sitting in my father's lap when someone brought the baby in and held it out for him to take. He told me to get off, that he wanted to hold the baby for a while. I said no. He said I was being naughty and pushed me off. *My* father pushed me off his lap and held her instead. She reached out and grabbed my Teddy from me. I pulled it back, but Daddy told me to let her have it because she was only a baby and I was almost five. So I bit her foot all bloody, and my father, my own Daddy, spanked me. I'm not sorry I bit her."

I looked up aghast. "I don't remember anything like that, nor did my parents ever mention it. What a little monster I must have been!"

"It's not surprising you don't remember. It's something else

you repressed, because it was unpleasant. You obviously had a daughter's fixation for your father, which is common, and you resented his showing attention to another child, particularly a girl. Making you give up your Teddy bear was the last straw. You felt betrayed by your idol."

Only one thing rang a bell. "I did have a Teddy bear," I recalled, "but that voice! It didn't sound like mine."

"No, it didn't. I'm rather tempted to think that, rather than being you or Phoebe, this might have been the inception of your third personality, if there is one. It might be that all memory of the incident has been wiped out of your subconscious and has been retained only in the memory of Madame X. Since she apparently didn't develop as fully as Phoebe did, she might easily have no color to her voice. In fact, this may well be the first time she has ever tried to articulate on her own."

I shook my head in bewilderment. "I just don't see where this fits with anything in my life. The baby, for instance—I can't imagine who she was."

"You didn't have a sister, did you?"

"No, I told you I was an only child."

"I had forgotten for the moment. No brothers or sisters, you say. How about girl cousins?"

"Only Rhiannon, but she was older."

"Well then, it must have been the child of some friend. You're not likely to remember that and it would explain why your father wanted you to give up your Teddy. He was teaching you to be a good hostess, but you thought he was rejecting you."

"In other words, I had an Electra complex," I defined, immediately rebelling at the idea. "But that's not true! I was always much more of a mother's girl. This doesn't make sense."

"You just don't remember. We all forget these things."

"And you really think that there is a third personality?"

He was tapping his pipe on his empty hand and I took that for a signal that time was nearly up. "I wouldn't make it as strong as that," he said. "I don't think anything like that at the moment.

I was only conjecturing on the basis of past cases. It's nothing more than a hypothesis at this time. We'll have to wait and see what unfolds. I want to change the direction of my questioning in our next session, so that will be all for today. We'll have another go at it tomorrow."

18

But we didn't. The next day's appointment was canceled by the arrival that night of David, looking like a little red prune, slightly premature, but fully developed. So Dr. Gordon had been right after all! Even then—I suppose one doesn't erase an ingrained fear that easily—I was actually relieved to see, under his left arm, a tiny birthmark, hereditary in Alan's family. Dr. Gordon was almost apologetic about that, as if he shouldn't have allowed such a thing. He came into the room the next morning while I was nursing the baby and assured me the mark could be removed later. He must have wondered at my reaction.

"It's not disfiguring where it is. Alan has one, too, and it never bothered him or me."

He smiled the way a physician does when he's humoring a patient. "I understand," he said, but of course, he didn't. "You hate the thought of surgery on your child. You don't have to decide anything now, but I do think you might change your mind later on."

He examined me briefly after the nurse had taken the baby.

"You're doing very well, Branwen," he beamed, "and so is the baby."

"Thanks to you, Doctor," I said.

"No, the credit has to go to Dr. Ambrose. He's done a fine job. You're a different person. I've seen this before with patients of his and that's why I sent you to him, although I'll admit I did have one reservation at the time."

It was impossible to speak at the moment, as he had the tongue depressor in my mouth and was peering into my throat. I tried to gargle a "What's that?" unsuccessfully, but he didn't need to be prodded.

"It's that itching foot of his," he replied. "He's apt to take off for parts unknown without warning. It may be just for a few days, a month or—well, on one occasion he didn't come back for a year. He never leaves a forwarding address with his secretary. I might not have referred you to him for that one reason if it weren't that his partner, Dr. Blehys, is quite competent—some people even prefer him. Have you met him yet?"

"No, he's been teaching a course in Budapest this fall. He won't be back until February."

"Oh well, then," Dr. Gordon said, packing away his stethoscope, "you won't have to worry about Ambrose leaving town right away. He never goes unless Blehys is here—nor has he ever been known to leave while a case was critical. But you're looking so well, you're liable to be graduated any time now."

The thin sliver of fear that had knifed into me vanished. It was true. I was doing well, I had a beautiful baby and there was no doubt as to his paternity.

Alan brought us home to an ecstatic Lance a few days after Christmas, so we saved our holiday celebration until then. The house was spicy with Mrs. Lemke's *Stollen* and *Pfefferniisse*, and a mincemeat pie baking in the oven. The tree, instead of being decked out in our accumulated assortment of decorations, was resplendent with cunning little felt ornaments shaped like angels, stars, drummer boys, bells, wise men, camels, and all the other Yuletide symbols that Mrs. Lemke had been making all year.

The first blizzard of the season had struck while I was in the hospital, followed by intense cold, so it was a white velvet world that surrounded us. Alan was doing double duty on the bird feeders, and I was delighted to see the Christmas red of a cardinal flash through the snowladen trees. Below the bluff lay an arctic sea with broken ridges of ice and dark-blue patches of open water from which geysers of condensation rose and blended into the horizon. The purity of the beauty outside and the bustle of activity within acted as a buffer between me and the shadows of the past year.

I was regaining the feeling of Olympian omnipotence I had experienced in Colorado, particularly when I held at my breast that perfect little being I—Alan and I had created. Mrs. Lemke wasn't happy unless she had something in the oven that negated all my good intentions about cutting down on calories, and Lance, instead of being jealous of the baby as I had feared he might be, regarded him as something precious over which he must stand guard night and day. I couldn't get over the miracle of him either, so healthy and normal and unmarked by all that had happened. But all that seemed far away now and even the possibility of Dr. Ambrose suddenly going AWOL for an indefinite period failed to dismay me.

In fact, if it weren't for the tapes and transcripts and the library book and the painting, I might have convinced myself I'd dreamed the whole thing. At times, looking down at my lightened and slimming body, I would wonder fleetingly if Phoebe might be encouraged to return, but I was so busy with my tiny anchor to reality, feeding him, changing diapers, and imagining his smiles were something more than gas, that I didn't have time to worry.

As soon as I was able to drive—no more "protective custody!" —I resumed analysis with Dr. Ambrose. Our sessions consisted mostly of counseling, with Phoebe popping out at his bidding without the use of hypnosis. Several times, however, he did hypnotize me in an attempt to reach Madame X or trace Phoebe

back to her inception, but his efforts were unsuccessful. When I wondered why he didn't play these new tapes back to me, or at least give me transcripts of them, he explained that there were no conclusive results and these would only serve to confuse me. I was rather annoyed, as I always am when doctors won't show me those little things they jot down about me. But he declined to play the tapes, saying that Phoebe was in a disturbed state, very nervous and uncertain about herself, and constantly complaining, "She's too strong for me." He assured me, however, that this was a hopeful sign that I was assimilating Phoebe's personality. I wasn't sure I welcomed that prospect.

"Phoebe's so irresponsible, so immature, and so—so—"

"Erotic?" he suggested slyly.

"Well, yes, in a childish sort of way though."

"I'm glad you qualified that. She's a natural creature. And she's a part of you that has been rather neglected. Oh, I know, she put you on your mettle with Alan," he added hastily when he saw me start to protest, "but even now, Branwen, you are not a complete woman. Married and a mother as you are, you still are mentally a virgin. You've never given yourself over completely to the ecstasy of love. Love to you is a storybook fantasy. Alan is your refuge—a father image, not a lover. You're a virgin mother, your children have been *your* creations, conceived by a Holy Imagination, while Alan has had to be an onlooking Joseph.

"But Phoebe, the woman, the leman, the nestmaker, who cares for the act of love for itself, is in you, too, demanding her right to expression. She has no desire for a career beyond being a woman, and if to be so means she must bow to man as her superior, she'll do so gladly because she knows that in her very weakness lies her strength."

I looked at him in dismay. For the first time I began to have misgivings. Maybe it *was* time he took a vacation. What he had just said—some of it was true—but the rest was so much rot. He was beginning to sound like a mixture of Freud and unregenerate malehood.

19

THE FOLLOWING SUNDAY Dr. Ambrose came to dinner, responding at last to an invitation long since extended. I soon found my recent pique disappearing. He and Alan had a wonderful time talking bridges and dams and I was surprised how conversant the doctor was with civil engineering. He described some ancient techniques the Egyptians and Romans had used that my husband had never heard of. It was with genuine regret that Alan, who had originally resigned himself to a dull afternoon discussing "shrink" topics, finally tore himself away. He had to catch a plane for Albuquerque where he was to give estimates on a new project.

While Mrs. Lemke was doing the dishes, I donned my boots and parka and took Dr. Ambrose outside to show him the property. He walked among the trees, fingering them and talking as if they were old friends. The evergreens and white birches and willows were easy to recognize. Even I could do that. But he was able to identify the ashes and maples, and that I could not have done in winter when they were barren.

"That's a marvelous ash," he commented, looking up at one that resembled the goddess Kali with her many arms. "The Brit-

ish thought it the tree of rebirth. The Norse thought that the great ash Ygdrasill was Odin's horse. The ancient Irish and Welsh made their coracles of ash."

What didn't this man know?

"I see you have a small grove of hawthorns," he went on, testing a thorn. "The hawthorn was considered an unlucky tree—probably because of thorns like this one. The tree rules the month of May and it was once thought unlucky to be married during that month. That's why so many weddings are held in June. The Great Goddess, under the name of Cardea, cast her spells with hawthorn and was supposed to hate all marriages. Really, with all these hawthorns you should have some rowan trees to counteract them."

He was joking of course.

"Do they grow over here?" I asked. "What is a rowan tree?"

"The mountain ash," he replied, "also known as the quickbeam. It signifies the quickening of life and so, appropriately, belongs to the latter part of January and early part of February, the season we're in right now, when the new life is beginning to stir under the snow."

"I'm afraid we don't have any of those," I lamented. "There were so many trees here already that we didn't see the need of adding any more."

His eyes twinkled. "Miss Lucinda might not have lost her lover if she'd had some rowan trees here. Now don't forget—you plant some this spring. Its scarlet berries were once thought to be the food of the gods. But most important, it was used to ward off witches and lightning."

"Good!" I laughed. "We've been thinking about having lightning rods installed on the roof. We'll just plant rowan trees instead. They're much prettier and decidedly less expensive."

Lance came bounding toward us just then, stopped short, then took off like a racehorse around the yard, plunging in and out of drifts. Winter has always been his favorite time of the year.

Suddenly in his exuberance he hurled himself at the doctor, knocking him down.

"Lance! You bad boy! You know you're not supposed to jump on people!" I scolded him, but Dr. Ambrose took it in good stride.

"That's a fine dog you have there," he said generously, brushing the snow off his coat. "Your protector. He was letting me know that you're his property, you know. Lancelot, the queen's knight!"

"You psychoanalyze dogs, too?" I responded, joining in the merriment.

"Oh yes—and pigs and cats and horses—and elephants, too. I'm especially good with elephants. Do you have any?"

"Sorry, the one we had got stagestruck and ran off to the circus."

The air was clear and exhilarating, making one feel lightheaded and prone to nonsense.

"Tell me more about the trees!" I prodded him.

"Well, I was just looking at your aspirin trees over there."

"Aspirin trees!"

"Yes, your willows. Did you know that the willow is a source of salicylic acid? The ancients used the bark and leaves to cure rheumatism and other aches and pains. And—" his eyes bored into me in mock seriousness—"the willow is worshiped by witches, since it's sacred to the moon goddess."

"What about the birch?" I asked, pointing to one.

"The birch symbolizes the beginning of life and is lucky, unlike the elder, which rules the last month of the Druid year, and is therefore the Death tree. December twenty-third, by the way, your son's birthdate, is the extra date of the lunar year and is governed by no tree."

He paused by a gnarled and twisted apple tree. "Now here is the noblest of all," he remarked. "At least the Druids considered it so—the tree of immortality."

"Eve didn't find it so," I countered.

"Because immortality wasn't for her as yet and by eating of the tree she was presuming to a divine privilege."

By now we'd entered the woods, where he stopped to admire a towering oak.

"The oak," he continued, "is the chief male god's tree, because it is the strongest, and therefore Zeus, Thor, and all the thunder gods like best to hurl their thunderbolts at it. But tell me, do you have an alder tree? That would be your tree."

"It would? I don't even know what one looks like. I thought they only grew in Europe."

"No, there are varieties here, too. It's a mixed-up tree—it seeks moisture like the willow, it has catkins like the birch, and leaves similar to the elm."

"My Jack-and-the-Beanstalk tree!" I exclaimed to myself, unaware I'd spoken aloud.

"Your what?"

"Oh, it's a kind of scrubby tree that's growing up the side of the cliff, looking as if it were trying to climb on board—you know, like Jack climbing up to the giant's castle. It's the tree that saved my life. I wasn't going to show it to you—I haven't been out there since."

I could sense the excitement tensing his frame. "Take me there," he said.

I started to demur.

"You must face your experience," he insisted quietly.

When we reached the rock he looked at the barren branches of the tree for some time, then knelt down and brushed the snow away from the trunk.

"You see these lenticels?"

"These what?"

He pointed to the mottled bark. "These spots on the trunk," he explained. "Birches and plum trees have them, too. This, my dear, is an alder. It had to be."

"Why?" It didn't seem like a game anymore, and he was less and less a psychiatrist.

"Because the alder was associated with the god Bran and his sister Branwen. Her son's name, Gwern, even meant 'alder.' An alder was so sacred that anyone who burned one was punished by having his house burned down. When it is cut down, the wood bleeds crimson, like a man, and it yields three dyes—red, green, and brown, signifying fire, water, and earth. Both in the *Odyssey* and in Welsh tradition it was the tree of resurrection, probably because its buds grow in a spiral, which has always symbolized resurrection and eternity."

"Resurrection's a very old concept, isn't it?" I mused. "The Egyptians had it and the Sumerians—"

"Older than that," he said.

"And yet I always associate the word 'resurrection' with Christ and Easter. And somehow God is—well—the Lord God of Abraham."

"That's the trouble with Judeo-Christians. They—we—forget that God existed from the beginning—if there was a beginning."

"You think we've always existed?"

"I find it hard to believe that life could have either a beginning or an end. Can a spiral end?"

"A spring is a spiral and it begins and ends."

"No, it is only a piece cut from a greater spiral. I'm not talking about that kind of spiral anyway. Anything material can be dissected, even a circle. I'm talking about Time."

"But that, too, is divided into seconds and minutes and days and months and centuries and—and millennia—"

"And still its coil winds upward. Can we stop Time by assigning dates to it? Does Time end with December thirty-first? Can we say there is no past or future because we live in the present? By the same token, can we say that a person has ceased to exist because he's no longer with us on our turn of the spiral?"

He rose and his figure against the fading light of day was like another tree rooted to the rock. The mood would pass, I assured myself. He would become the practitioner again, and we would make light of this moment.

"But you're a physician. You've seen people born and you've seen them die."

"I've seen bodies born," he replied. "I've seen bodies die. But I have never witnessed either the birth or death of a mind—or psyche, if you want to call it that—even though that's my specialty." He pointed to a white cicatrix across the dark slate of the late afternoon sky. "That jet that passed overhead just now—see where its contrail plunges into the lake. If we were to trust our eyes alone, we would think the plane had crashed, but you and I know it has only gone beyond our horizon."

I stared at him. "Why, Dr. Ambrosel" I exclaimed. "I never thought of you as a religious man."

"I don't belong to any formal religion. I just don't believe that horizons are limiting factors."

"Is that what you work on when you go away where no one can reach you? I mean—are you going to come out with some new—uh—metapsychiatric theory?"

He looked at me sharply. "What do you know about my going away?"

"Nothing, except that Dr. Gordon made a remark one time—"

I could see he wasn't pleased.

"I would rather have told you myself—when the time comes," he said stiffly.

"I think Dr. Gordon had every right to warn me," I retorted. "What if some day I should go down to your office expecting to see you and find you gone?"

"I would never leave you or any other patient during a critical stage, nor at any stage without recourse to the best professional help. If I'm not there, my associate, Dr. Blehys, will be. He's thoroughly qualified—probably more so than I. He's a recognized authority all over the world."

"I—I've never met him. I don't know him," I floundered.

"You will before long. He'll be returning any day now. He'll have complete records of all my cases. In fact, I've even corresponded with him about you."

"About me?" I was flattered in spite of myself.

"Yes—you've been a very interesting case."

"Well, I hope he takes his time returning. You would let me know before you go, wouldn't you?"

He paused. "We all have our weaknesses," he said at last. "Mine is—I can't stand good-byes. I don't even tell my secretary when I'm going to leave."

"But Dr. Gordon says sometimes your absence extends over years. What do you do about income taxes and—and bills and rent and those things?"

"Dr. Blehys has been given full power of attorney to draw funds from my account to cover any contingency."

"Yes, but if nobody can send you an accounting, how can you know how much money you can withdraw?"

He shrugged. "I just don't withdraw any. I have money in some foreign banks. There'll be enough to tide me through."

"You're a strange man, Dr. Ambrose. You make me think of a magician pulling a disappearing act. Only you do it without mirrors. Or do you? Maybe you just walk into one like Alice."

He laughed. "I wish I could. One could learn a lot—seeing the world in reverse, I mean."

I was being nosy and I knew it, but my curiosity would not be restrained. "And your apartment remains idle all that time?"

"Why not? It's as good a storage place as any. I detest packing things. This way, when I come back, I can just begin where I left off."

"I'll miss you." I felt my voice catch. "I don't know this Dr. Blehys and I hope he doesn't come back for a long time," I almost pleaded, "then you can't leave."

A dizziness assailed me, as though a crutch were being yanked out from under me. His heavily gloved hands holding my mittened ones steadied me.

"Branwen—" he started to say, but whatever it was, it was lost on me, for apparently Phoebe decided to come out at that moment. I can imagine how bored she must have been with our

conversation. What she said or did I don't know, but she must have retreated without warning, for the next thing I knew, I was standing with my back to the beech tree and Dr. Ambrose had me in his arms.

"No, Phoebe, don't! Don't go away!" he was murmuring. "I've been waiting for you all afternoon, but I didn't know how to call you out—not here at her house. I've both wanted you and dreaded you—and then you were here, looking up at me."

A coldness enveloped my limbs as I stood there, his arms around me, his hand stroking my hair, but I made no move in my utter astonishment and confusion.

"Phoebe—" He pressed his lips to my forehead. "You're so distant today. Don't always run from me. Don't be a tease! Oh, my darling, you realize you're making me act very unprofessionally, don't you?"

So that was why there had been no more tapes! My normal reaction would have been to push him away and make him instantly aware of his mistake. But now some instinct totally foreign to my nature was governing my actions. What had been happening? I had to know. If I could just deceive him long enough—

"Why unprofessionally?" I asked. "I told you I'm not your patient, Big Man," I said, echoing the words I'd heard her say.

"But you are part of her, don't you see, Phoebe?" he insisted.

"No, I don't at all. I deny that." I was relentless. "I'm not interested in her. She bores me. What I want to know is—what am I to *you*?"

He released me and moved away. "Oh, Phoebe, how can I answer that when I don't know myself."

"Are you trying to say you love me?"

"Haven't I already told you? And yet, that isn't entirely right either and I've known it all along."

"You mean you don't love me? I wish you'd make up your mind." I tried to register petulance, not the disgust I really felt.

"Don't mock me, Phoebe. I can't get you out of my mind—if

that is love. I'm not sure it is. I never thought such things were for me. I've always been an observer, not a participant–until Branwen came along."

"Branwen!" I couldn't keep the shock out of my voice.

"Are you really jealous, Phoebe?" he asked. "I think you flatter me. I'm much too old for you. Still, when we're together I see the stars come out and the heavens glow. But the difference is –Branwen can make me walk among the stars. I knew from the beginning that there was no chance with her. There were too many obstacles: Alan, our ages, the fact that she's my patient. But with her I could realize a relationship that didn't offend those impediments–and the rest wasn't important until you came along and made it important. Here was the part of her I'd considered unattainable suddenly offered to me. I'd been playing God to my patients for so long it came as a shock to find out that I was as human–and as weak–as anyone else."

He laid his hand on my arm and I cringed.

"Don't go, Phoebe," he pleaded. "I'm not finished yet."

Nor am I, I thought. What had really gone on?

"Why should I stay? So you can make love to Branwen's body again?" I almost choked on the words.

"Phoebe!" The astonishment in his voice seemed genuine. "You can't fault me for a few kisses! It's what I haven't done that makes my days and nights unbearable. Sometimes I think we're caught in a fatal destiny–you and Branwen and I–one over which we have no control. It's as if this all happened before, but it wasn't right then and it isn't right now. If I could only remember. I dreamed last night that I saw Branwen standing at the other end of a vast library–she was holding a book out for me to read, a book which contained all the wisdom in the world. 'I have it open to the chapter,' she was saying, 'that explains everything and shows us the way.' I went toward her and was about to take the book when I tripped over something soft and yielding. It was you, Phoebe, and I fell and fell and fell–then I awoke."

"So what are you going to do about us," I challenged him.

"I can't go on like this. I hope you know that. I'm going to go away for a while—no, not right away—but after Dr. Blehys returns. He can take Branwen's case. She's well enough now. So this has to be good-bye, Phoebe—my bright moon!"

He tilted my head back and covered my unresponsive lips with his. Yet, deep down in me there *was* response, for I was now aware of the rapport that had grown between us. He was right—Alan never need worry, at least as far as I was concerned, but I knew now a part of me always had and always would belong to this man. I took his arms from around me gently, then drew away.

"Good-bye, Big Man," I said softly, "but"—and I couldn't resist this parting shot—"don't be too sure you're rid of me yet!"

I whirled away from him, dancing in among the trees as I thought Phoebe might. He started after me, but just then Lance joined in the game and I leaned down to rough his ears. When I straightened up I was myself again.

"I beg your pardon, Dr. Ambrose," I said. "I'm afraid my mind wandered. You were saying?"

He reacted instantly and with aplomb. "I was telling you I wouldn't think of leaving until Dr. Blehys gets back, but your visits will be less frequent from now on. I want to see how you do on your own." He talked easily, as if nothing had intervened. But suddenly he seemed very, very old, walking toward the house with a heavy, measured tread.

"It's getting dark. I hope you're not chilled," I said. "We'd better go in. If you're not going to see me so often, Dr. Ambrose, do you mind if I postpone tomorrow's appointment? I have some things to do, and you're right—I must start depending on myself."

He seemed actually relieved.

"Certainly you may. However, I'm going to give you my phone number at home, just in case some serious problem should arise after office hours. In any event, I'll want to see you at the end of the week." He took out the notebook, scribbled in it, then tore out the page and handed it to me.

"Here's the number," he said. "Now I'd better go in and call a cab."

I noted the empty driveway with surprise. "You didn't come out by car?" I asked.

"Don't have one," he remarked as we mounted the steps to the porch. "I guess you think that peculiar, but I hate driving, and I'll bet you my taxi fares don't amount to what maintaining an automobile would anyway."

Thinking of the new snow tires we'd just bought for mine, I had to agree—almost. "I'll take you home," I offered, but he declined, and I didn't insist because it was time to nurse David.

As I watched the cab slew out of the icy driveway, a feeling of both relief and sadness came over me.

"Phoebe, how could you?" I scolded. "Don't you have any shame? Why did you have to go and ruin everything?"

I closed the front door and started to go upstairs, but my foot faltered on the first step. Tricking him like that. It was more the sort of thing Phoebe would have done. Phoebe! Had the merger really begun?

20

THE WEATHER TURNED warm during the night and along with the thaw came rain, then a perverse plunge of the thermometer by morning, which turned the rain to sleet, and by the time I got up, the world outside was ablaze with diamonds. Each branch, each minuscule twig was weighted down in gelid, ruthless splendor. Mrs. Lemke and I attacked the evergreens and some of the more fragile trees with brooms, knocking away the ice that threatened to break their limbs. The willows we left alone, knowing their supple branches would endure their burden, and they stood there motionless, great showers of crystal, crackling and snapping as long prisms broke away and shattered on the frozen snow.

Lance attempted to climb the frozen drifts, like the knight up the glass hill, but he either slid back down on his haunches or broke through the sharp, jagged crust. Betrayed by his beloved snow, he was as willing as we were to return to the house.

It was a day to be contented inside and Mrs. Lemke remarked on that several times. Perhaps she had a presentiment that something might rob her of her cozy security, but it was I who knew something was wrong when the phone rang. Afraid something

might have happened to Alan, I answered, but it was a man's voice asking for Mrs. Lemke. I handed her the phone and I saw her round cheeks go pinched and drawn. It was an Army chaplain calling. Her son Harold had been badly injured in a jeep accident and might not live.

We had a long and treacherous drive to and from the airport over slippery roads that sent us into a spin several times. By the time we reached home, my arms were aching from gripping the wheel. I carried David into the house, fed him and put him in his crib. I was so exhausted I didn't bother to make supper, just nibbled on some crackers and went to bed. Mrs. Lemke would be well on her way now, winging through the night—she'd always said she'd never fly! I could see her sitting upright in the plane, her worn hands tightly clenched, wondering if she'd get there in time. Poor Mrs. Lemke! A widow—and now her only son—the bed was so temptingly comfortable—

Phoebe stood by the telephone downstairs, holding the slip of paper Dr. Ambrose had given me. I looked down at her from where I floated, remote and disembodied. She's won, I thought to myself in a curiously detached mood. She's taken my body and I can't get back—now I know how she felt all along. Nor did it seem strange that I was seeing her at last. Now she couldn't see me. She dialed nervously, getting the wrong number at first, and finally speaking into the phone in a half-whisper.

"Doctor?" Her voice trembled. "It's Phoebe. I found the scars and I know who she is. You've got to come right away."

She listened to his reply, all the while turning and looking over her shoulder as if someone were after her. Did she sense me hovering there? But I meant her no harm.

"Yes, yes!" Her voice was urgent. "She's the one all right and I'm so frightened. . . . No, Mrs. Lemke isn't here. Her son was hurt in an accident. It's as if she *wanted* her out of the house. Come quick, oh, come quick! I don't know how long I can hold

out against her. I've tried to break away, but she's stronger than ever."

She hung up the telephone and started up the stairs. I tried to call to her and reassure her, but she paid no heed. *She just kept running up the stairs into the clouds, from which the flights emerged, not as stairs, but a great glass tower, slowly turning, and a rose-colored bird was beating its wings against one of the windows until they became bloodied and broken. Yet somehow she managed to stay aloft until a black form darted out of the mist and struck her again and again.*

"Stop it! Stop it!" I cried, but I had no tongue, and the torment continued until the ruby bird crumpled and fell, over and over, down into the clouds–

Only they weren't clouds–they were a vast field of flowers where a white horse was grazing. It lifted its head and neighed as a gray steed approached. Astride was Dr. Ambrose, wearing a high, conical hat and long flowing black robes embroidered with silver crescents and pentacles. Then I saw Phoebe standing on a small rise, wearing a diaphanous white kirtle with a heavily embroidered green and gold girdle at her waist. Three birds circled, singing, above her. The doctor dismounted and started toward her, his face grim and set with purpose, but as she stood there holding her arms out to him, the breeze ruffling the gossamer about her body, I saw his jaw go slack, the sweat stand out on his brow, and his eyes glaze with desire. He reached for her, but in that instant she sprang to the back of the white mare and was off into the sunset. He set off in pursuit, but no matter how cruelly he spurred his steed he kept falling farther behind. Hers moved so fast that horse and rider now glowed red with the friction of their passage, and a pack of white hounds with blood-red ears were sprinting alongside them.

Ahead lay a black-green forest into which she and the hounds disappeared.

"Phoebe! Niniane!" he called. "Wait for me!" But his voice was lost in the baying of the pack.

Then I saw her rein in before a cave that was half-hidden in the underbrush. Slowly she circled her mount widdershins, again and again, obviously wanting the doctor to narrow the gap between them. The animal was now black as a burned-out cinder, so was her robe, but her hair flowed silver down it, and I knew her for who she really was. If only I could stop him, grab hold of the bridle and turn his horse! But I had no substance.

At last she dismounted, tossed the reins over a spike on a low-hanging branch of a giant hawthorn, and followed the hounds into the cavern. She glided effortlessly along the passage, even though the ground was strewn with glass-sharp rocks. Above, the ceiling was hung with icicles and the gray forms of sleeping bats. I could hear Dr. Ambrose stumbling over the jagged stones, his breathing labored, and his feet leaving blood behind them. Every once in a while he would stop and listen for her footfalls, but she had disappeared behind a tall crystal column that marked the entrance into a large chamber, in the center of which lay a subterranean pool. One after the other the hounds dived into the murky water, barely rippling its surface, until the last one vanished, and the pool lay once more silent.

His robe torn and flapping loosely, Dr. Ambrose entered the chamber, still calling for her. His dark eyes swept its dim recesses, but there was nothing to be seen but the glistening rock formations in the half-light.

Then a whirr of wings and the flashing of talons and a hooked beak—with laughter screeching—and the doctor was standing there with blood pouring from empty eye sockets. Yet he was strangely smiling.

"I've been so blind," his voice echoed, "but now I see. I know you now—I know you from all those other times. Branwen! What have you done to her? Must it always be the same?"

I tried to call to him, but it was useless. With arms outstretched he staggered to the pool and knelt down, plunging his hands into its inky waters as though he hoped to drag me from its depths.

She came stealing up behind him, a heavy splinter of ice in

her hands. I wanted to reach out and snatch it from her, but I had no hands—those were my *hands holding the icicle. He never turned nor heard it descend and he did not cry out as he disappeared into the black water. The only sound was the shrill call of a falcon as it fled through the shadows. The raven darted after it, but it escaped, deep into the cavern, winging its way toward some distant light.*

She stood at the pool's edge, staring at the water as bubbles rose to the surface, then burst and flattened out into concentric circles. Her silver hair hung down in icy strands, and the black gloss of the waters reflected on her face. With a swift motion of her hands, a huge slab broke off from the side of the cave and fell with a crash over the pool. The stone was smooth and white, like the lid of a freezer.

Then she turned to me for the first time, her eyes glittering green in their blue lids, her skin drawn tight over skeletal cheekbones. . . .

And suddenly I returned to my body, finding it vulnerable and a hindrance as I fled up the winding stairs which led out of the cave, she pursuing me, trying to pull me back. Up and up we went, straight out of hell, and into the house again, only it had endless flights and floors that turned on an axis, around which the staircase wound. Somewhere David was sleeping—no, he was crying in my arms and I had *to protect him. On and on I climbed, feeling her arms twining around us, the viselike grip of her talons, her foul breath wheezing into my neck.*

At last we were out on the widow's walk, and her hand was on my mouth as she tried to force me over the rail. Clasping the baby to me with one hand and clinging desperately to the railing with the other, I looked down the dizzying heights into the lake, where no bottom existed, and the hawthorns extended their thorns. But the alder rose from the side of the house and coiled one wiry branch around her throat, forcing her to release me. Her knuckles whitened on the alder as she struggled with it, but the coils only drew tighter—and then she was limp in its grasp, her

eyes gone moist, her cheeks fleshed once more with innocence, her lips parted as though praying for forgiveness. So lovely and forlorn—a wounded animal—so potent in her weakness! I had to grant her—anything—she wanted—even—David—

Slowly I lifted him and held him out to her. She slid out of the alder's toils and came toward us, reaching for him—a little too quickly—too greedily. My eyes took the measure of the hunger in her eyes—

Now the hounds came again, rushing from the stairs, but Lance was there first, slashing and ripping their throats. I thrust David into a corner and turned to meet her. This time the strength was in me, pouring into me as the clouds slipped away from a full moon, from which perpendicular rays blazed across the sky. With a supreme effort I shook her off, and she hissed away into nothing as the alder changed into Alan. He picked up the baby and we stood there, the lake no longer rooted in hell, but stretching before us in endless union with the blue vault overhead.

I woke up to the sound of David crying for his feeding. The moon had broken through the clouds and was shining in my window, its rays forming a cross on the glass.

21

FRIGHTENING AS THE first part of the dream had been, the end had brought such a sense of peace and triumph that, after nursing the baby, I drifted off again and slept soundly for the last few hours of the night. In the morning I tackled the dirty clothes Mrs. Lemke had been unable to finish the day before. As I started to load the washer, I noticed that the lid of the cistern was slightly ajar, although the water was not exposed, and a hammer was lying beside it. Alan must have been working on the pump again. He'd said something about not liking the way it sounded. Surprised at his carelessness, I pushed the cover into place. It was warped and had to be fastened or the slightest pressure might knock it off. As I picked up the hammer I ran my free hand over the wood, smooth and cold and slippery. Suddenly I felt a little sick. Why had I let Alan enamel it white?

"White will make it show up better so that no one will trip over it," he'd said.

Of course. Perfectly good reasoning. I was being silly. I drove the nails down firmly. Over at the sink I started to turn the faucet, then hesitated. Maybe Alan hadn't finished fixing the pump. Perhaps that was why the cover was off. . . . I'd better switch to

the other cistern just in case. . . . Something was moving at the other end of the basement! No. . . . I began to laugh shakily. It was only my reflection in the old mirror that was still propped against the masonry. A web of cracks had opened up in the brittle glass, fragmenting my image into a badly assembled jigsaw puzzle. As I moved, the mutlifaceted reflection followed, distorting itself into a series of cubistic impressions.

"'Nude Descending a Staircase,'" I quoted under my breath, only I wasn't nude and the sensation was unpleasant, not amusing. I took a sheet from the wash and draped it over the heavy wooden frame, then went over and turned the valve to the cistern.

After the clothes were done, and David fed and napping, I drew a bath for myself. Zero weather had set in and there's nothing more luxurious, when the world outside is locked in *rigor mortis*, than to be able to turn off the weather and take a long hot soak in the tub.

I basked in my warm, watery cocoon. Slowly I lathered my limbs, one by one, then slid them lazily back into the water, letting the soap bubbles rise to the surface to mingle with the bubble bath. I gingerly scrubbed my right foot, feeling rivulets of tickles running up my leg as I drew my washcloth over the sole. When I was finished, I repeated the process with the left foot. As I scoured my heel, I noticed a crescent of faint white dashes on the skin as I pulled it taut. These scars had been there as long as I could remember, but I'd never thought much about them. There was a similar crescent on the other side of the heel, the marks well spaced out.

"So I bit her foot all bloody!"

The words reverberated in my mind as I sat there, almost paralyzed with realization.

That was it! I didn't bite anyone! *I was bitten.* These were *toothmarks* on my heel, that were once close together, but spread apart as I grew. That was why they no longer resembled a bite, and that was why I never paid any attention to them. It was *she*

who talked in the doctor's office! *It was Rhiannon's memory he recorded, not mine!*

The bubbles were going flat and the water beginning to chill —or was it just me?—but the tub was a sanctuary I was loath to leave. So she *was* there after all! Oh, my god, David! What should I do? Call Dr. Ambrose—I must call Dr. Ambrose immediately!

But he wasn't there. His secretary said he hadn't come to the office that morning and that no one answered at his home.

"Isn't that unusual?" I asked.

"No," she replied. "Dr. Blehys is here. He could see you tomorrow morning."

"Couldn't he see me this afternoon?" I felt the walls closing in on me.

"I'm sorry," in her best sweetness-and-Freud manner, "but he's all booked up—with Dr. Ambrose not being here, you know. He just returned yesterday morning and spent the day going over cases with Dr. Ambrose."

"Well, could he come out here after hours? It—it's terribly important."

She was apologetic but firm. "Dr. Blehys doesn't make house calls. Besides, he has a meeting tonight. I'll put you down for ten tomorrow morning."

I let the phone fall into its cradle. How could Dr. Ambrose do this to me? To go off without seeing me at least for one last time! But, of course—he hadn't dared see me—or Phoebe!

I began to recover my composure, and with that came rational explanation. Why didn't I think of it before? It *was my* memory that Dr. Ambrose had tapped, not Rhiannon's. Naturally I'd have recollection of an experience as traumatic as that one somewhere in my subconscious, because I was the baby that had been bitten. Being a natural mimic, I'd reproduced Rhiannon's words as my own mind recalled them.

A long distance call from Alan steadied me. He'd finished in Albuquerque and would arrive home sometime after midnight.

Surely a few more hours! Besides, it was all a lot of nothing anyway. Dr. Ambrose would never have left if he hadn't thought I could manage on my own.

After supper I tucked David into his crib upstairs, his tiny hands curled like pink seashells, and then I took a book from the library and stationed myself on the living room couch to wait up for Alan. I was glad I hadn't been able to get Dr. Blehys to come out. It would have been a poor sort of introduction. What would he have thought of me? Besides, Dr. Ambrose would probably be back by the end of the week—he didn't expect me until Friday anyway.

I started to read, but the letters blurred before my eyes. Shaking my head, I fought against the drowsiness that assailed me, but it gradually crawled up over my limbs and crouched on my chest, as the book slipped from my hand—

I was standing in the snows on the top of a mountain, my arms outstretched to the light, but the earth's talons clung to my feet and I was forced to look back, down the spiral of years to the ultimate depth, where a mare-headed goddess, with the blood of sacrifice on her lips, lifted her head and whinnied her exultation. I was crouched in the shadows with a golden halter in one hand and a spear in the other, while my shield lay on the floor, catching the blood of a dying boy. . . . Timmy! Incense rose from the altar and now it was David being lifted into Timmy's place. I snatched up the shield and held it over the child, thrusting the spear into Rhiannon's breast as I did so, but it split and broke off harmlessly, although she did loose her grip on the infant and another was lifted into his place—and another—and another—all humanity was passing over the altar. I lunged again and again, but she only laughed and at last closed in on me.

Turn after turn, up the spiral, we met and parted, then met again, always contending, grip against grip—a kitten dead and a baby—an old man sealed in a cave and a hawk spiraling its

way into the heavens—she drawing a veil between us—I ripping it away—

Suddenly the mountain moved and got clumsily to its feet, spinning me off its back into a fragment of cloud, from which I watched a long line of blindfolded people filing past the behemoth. It extended its trunk to them and one by one they groped along it and then went away, nodding their heads knowingly. Some I recognized. Alan was there and Dr. Ambrose, and Marian Dahlmann, and Dr. Gordon—until at last from my vantage point I saw myself walking up to the beast, my eyes bandaged like the rest, but apart from them and trying to make some sense out of the tail, which none of the others had touched—

Until the elephant turned and wasn't an elephant—it was a mare with blood on its mouth. . . .

A frenzied barking aroused me. Bared teeth were slashing close to my face and tugging and ripping something in my hand. I wasn't on the davenport. I was standing by the crib with the moonlight streaming in the windows, scattering the crystal bones of trees on the nursery floor. A high wind had risen outside, opening breaches in the clouds and spattering brittle needles of ice on the roof and gutters.

As I looked uncomprehendingly at the gashed pillow in my hands, the barking subsided into a whimper and I heard a tail thumping in the dark—nothing else. David! What had I—she—done to him? But then a thin wail of hunger issued from the crib.

"Branwen, *what* are you doing?"

The light flashed on and Alan, still in his overcoat, stood in the doorway, horror and a terrible comprehension in his eyes. He was wrong, of course, as was Dr. Ambrose—and now Dr. Blehys and all the others. Only Lance understood. Only Lance and I could hear the metallic laughter of Rhiannon echoing in the speaking tubes.

22

I've been a long time writing this. At first they wouldn't let me have my typewriter or my papers, but Dr. Blehys finally gave them the order so I've been working on this every free moment I've had. There's always the therapy sessions to take up time, and then, too, I have to hide this when they come in. No one must read it until I want them to.

Thank goodness, no one takes what I'm doing seriously. They know I'm writing something, but they just pass me by with superior smiles, but I can tell what they're thinking: "Poor thing! Let her scribble away—it can't do her any harm."

I have to work fast because Rhiannon's growing stronger again. She gets out more frequently, I think. They don't know she's here, of course. What happened to Phoebe, I couldn't say. Even Dr. Blehys hasn't been able to call her out. Maybe Rhiannon killed her because she didn't need her anymore. Anyway, I know it's Rhiannon who's here because they're always treating me for the asthma attacks they tell me I have, but I can't remember any. I'm not an asthmatic.

She's up to her old tricks again—impressing others, being a

paragon—until she's almost convinced them I'm cured. Dr. Blehys says I'll be going home soon.

Oh, how I wish I could! I wander up and down here in the corridor in the open ward. At one end is the door leading to the outside and freedom, but the door at the other end has a window with bars over it and I know that's where the criminal and the violent are kept. I try not to look at it, but it's always there.

David's toddling now. Alan comes and takes me for drives out into the country, David in his car seat between us. And somehow Lance squeezes into the front, too, lying across my legs, his head in my lap. My little boy thinks I'm a nice lady to play with and he'd very much like to take me home with him. I don't need winding up like his other toys.

When the ride is over and we turn the last corner, Lance immediately knows I'm going to desert them again. He whines and clambers into the back seat, turning his head away from me because I've betrayed him.

I've had to write this in bits and pieces, mailing them out immediately to Alan as I finish them, or handing them to him when he comes, because Rhiannon is always trying to break out and destroy them. She's succeeded several times and I have had to rewrite those sections. I made Alan promise not to read any of this until it's complete, because I want him to get the whole story at one time. He'll be here any minute now to pick up this last chapter. I don't know what he's going to believe. He may just think me hopelessly insane.

But if he does, even that's not all bad. At least I'll have saved him and my child from Rhiannon. As long as I must share my body with her, neither of them is safe if I am free, but if I am kept here—then I have her checkmated! Free, my body is her channel for evil, but committed, I have trapped her with it. She cannot work her evil elsewhere if I am held behind stone walls. If she could I don't believe Mrs. Lemke's son would have re-
35 covered. His accident was just the chance she'd been waiting for.

So I must stay here, even if I must let my family think me insane, so that she'll be confined, too.

Dr. Ambrose hasn't returned. No one thinks that unusual, considering his past disappearances. Still, Alan may suspect something by now. Not long after I came here he moved into an apartment, where Mrs. Lemke still keeps house for him and David. But the strange thing is that he hasn't tried to sell or rent our house—just closed it up. I wonder how he can afford it. He says he's keeping it for when I leave here—as if I could go back there! Could it be that he's afraid to have someone look into the cistern —or to look into it himself?

But I can't let things go on this way. I, who have always lived in deathly fear of what others might think—what a foolish, vain, obscene fear!—I have to break this barrier myself. With this book, like the message the other Branwen once sent beneath a starling's wing, I surrender all pride, all dignity before the world, baring the most private parts of my life and thought. I would not be more naked if I were to walk nude in public—but something must be done to solve the riddle. In this skeptical age, when so few believe in a God or afterlife, when the deity is money, power, science, or drugs, I beg for belief. Most people who read my story will think I'm truly mad, but perhaps somewhere there is someone—some one person—who, too, has touched the elephant's tail.

I sent a letter this morning to the local police, telling them what I think happened to Dr. Ambrose. They may ignore it, knowing where I am at present, but the police in our suburb are well-trained and thorough—I don't think they'll fail to investigate. And who knows? The cistern may be empty.

But if it isn't, then Alan, no matter how much you want to protect me, you will be duty bound to hand this book over. I'll have to stand trial, of course. Dr. Ambrose told me that people like me are legally sane—I remember how relieved I was when he said that. And yet—does that make me responsible for Rhiannon? The courts would have to decide. Wisconsin, however, has

no death penalty. At the worst, I'll have to remain in an institution—asylum or prison—for the rest of my life. But I have closed the door on Rhiannon. As long as I'm alive, she can't escape.

And yet, if there is someone—someone with uncommon insight—then perhaps the world will find a way to vanquish Rhiannon. I know this much—the veil between this life and the unknown beyond must someday be torn away, for that veil, which is our ignorance, is at once her protection and her weapon.

Oh, dear God, I realize that I may never see my little boy with his turned-up nose or my faithful Lance again—and Alan only through a barred window. Nothing ever happens until the time is ripe—and who is to predict the ripening? But one thing I do know—Rhiannon and I will meet again and again until someday, at some turn of the spiral, we will come together in our last struggle and *I will win.*